On the Verge of To-day:

Emerson and the Emergence of the American Age

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used for frequently cited works. Citations are given by volume (where applicable) and page number.

Works by Emerson

AS *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

CEC *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*. Ed. Joseph Slater. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.

CS *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Albert J. Frank. 4. Vols. Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 1989-1992.

EL *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961.

J *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, Emerson, Edward Waldo, Waldo Emerson Forbes, Bruce Rogers, 10 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909.

L *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Ralph Leslie Rusk. 6 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966-1995.

LL *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson. 2. vols. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2001.

W *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 12 vols. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. Centenary Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-4.

Works by other authors

DiA Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America.* Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Library of America, 2004.

GA Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe.* Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983.

KSA Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe.* 15 vols. Ed. Giorgio Colli, Mazzino Montinari. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980.

TWA Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *Werke.* 20 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970.

"Old and new put their stamp to everything in Nature. The snowflake that is now falling is marked by both. The present moment gives the motion and the color of the flake, Antiquity its form and properties. All things wear a lustre which is the gift of the present, and a tarnish of time."

– *Ralp Waldo Emerson, "Quotation and Originality" (1876)*

"I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future, / I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness. / I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face, / Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you."

– *Walt Whitman in "Poets to Come" (1887)*

"There must be a revolution. Let the revolution come, and let one come breathing free into the earth to walk by hope alone."

– *Ralph Waldo Emerson in his* Journals *(1838)*

"The presence of poetry is still to come: it comes from beyond the future and does not stop coming when it is here. A temporal dimension different from the one of which the time of the world has made us masters is at play in language when language lays bare, by the rhythmic scansion of being, the space of its unfolding."

– *Maurice Blanchot, "The Book to Come" (1959)*

Introduction, or, "I no longer believe this"

Reputedly, in the midst of preaching a sermon, Emerson interjected without stopping: "I no longer believe this" (see Mott 2003: par. 8). He then went on to deliver the rest of the sermon, failing to specify why he had made the peculiar little remark. This odd little moment, slight and coincidental as it may seem, can be read as an example of Emerson's eccentricism, as an example of his flamboyant but somewhat excessive enthusiasm, more concerned with his performance than with the (systematic or typological) consistency of his sermons. Or, the quixotic little incident may be read as an instance in which Emerson lets on his special sense of a rhetorical sensibility or, rather, responsibility: In the middle of delivering the sermon, Emerson here allows his sermon to be inflected by the situation in which it is delivered, acknowledging, momentarily, that our uses of language are necessarily dependant not only upon their own logic but also upon the circumstances in which they are articulated. Emerson's "I no longer believe this" then exhibits that we can never simply rely on a doctrine of words, but that we need to make the present moment conform with our writing and *vice versa*. It also suggests, that a poetic performance or *Vollzug* is always irreducible, it eludes the authoritative control of the system (rhetoric, doctrinal, typological, etc.) that brings it about. But because we cannot but pay tribute to this irreducibility of our uses of language *in* language, language is referred back to itself so that we discover that what may have been an authoritative articulation in one moment is destabilized by its rhetorical performance in the next. What Emerson calls "poetry" or "literature" is precisely characterized by such a moment of discourse being referred back to itself. As Emerson points out in a lecture in 1841 ("The Method of Nature"):

> "What is best in any work of art but that part which the work itself seems to require and do; that which the man cannot do again; that which flows from the hour and the occasion, like the eloquence of men in a tumultuous debate? It was always the theory of literature that the word of a poet was authoritative and final. He was supposed to be the mouth of a divine wisdom. We rather envied his circumstance than his talent. We too could have gladly prophesied standing in that place. We so quote our Scriptures; and the Greeks so quoted Homer, Theognis, Pindar, and the rest. If the theory has receded out of modern criticism, it is because we have not had poets. Whenever they appear, they will redeem their own credit." (*W*, I, 210-1)

For poets to "redeem" their "credit" would thus signal a double acknowledgment: on the one hand, of the irreproducible urgency of a present moment whose

fleeting forms can only be caught tentatively in language ("that which flows from the hour and the occasion"), and on the other, of the inevitable rhetoricity of any performance in language ("that part which the work itself seems to require and do"). Emerson thinks, as we will see, that the two moments can never quite be abstracted from each other, since the eventfulness of the present moment inflects the articulation of the poet just as much as his poetic expression changes the circumstances in which it is uttered. For Emerson, this is never merely a matter of poetic significance, rather, poetry's special inclination towards figurality makes it the spark of everything that is political. Therefore, what Emerson terms the "radical correspondence" (*W*, I, 29) of the moment of writing, of poetry, and of figuration with that of the event of a present moment yet unregimented by historical discourse in Emerson is both the characteristic sign of a specifically American poetics as well as, more generally, the condition *sine qua non* of an American politics as a *democratic* politics.

It has become fashionable in literary studies, to suggest all kinds of a return to politics. These returns commonly suggest a more 'authentic' ground for literary studies in politics and imagine an actualization of the literary by its exposure to the vicissitudes of everyday life. I am taking a different route in this study by arguing that there is in fact no such political *a priori* but that we need to look precisely at the literary or the poetic in order to find a moment of figuration or *poiesis* that is prior to any notion of politics. If we insist on this moment of figuration, as I will argue with Emerson, the literary will no longer be merely an extension of a more properly 'authentic' field of politics, rather, it will serve as the nucleus for any kind of political articulation. As a consequence, and as my introductory example suggests, I am not so much interested in uncovering the 'programme' of Emerson's poetics. Rather, I am interested in the ways in which Emerson's writing itself performs or elaborates what it purports: namely figuration as a political force and the moment of figuration as that which both describes and brings about the fleeting forms of a democratic politics.

As a consequence, this study also proposes a different approach to Emerson's writing. It does not aim to establish a systematic or consistent 'Emerson' – if there ever was such a thing as a single 'Emerson'. And it does not attempt to read Emerson's writing chronologically, comprehensively, or in its entirety. On the contrary: I will attempt to make obvious the import of single passages and how they connect to other passages in his work. This will also help to establish a terminological network that goes beyond the limits of a single essay, sermon or lecture. Even though I am convinced that there are a number of lasting thematic concerns in Emerson's writing, these concerns cannot be reduced to a systematic treatment, or, for that matter, to the confines of a single essay. Emerson's sermons, lectures, and essays call for a kind of intertextual reading that locates connections or continuities, but also disruptions and inconsistencies *within* his work. And it is

only if we are willing to give up an insistence on systematic consistency in favour of an attention to processes of figuration and re-figuration that we may begin to assess Emerson's procedure.

This characteristic procedure is the product of Emerson's habits of reading and writing. His work is the result of sixty years of reading and excerpting the literature available in his time. His diverse interests range from the Classics, to Shakespeare, to British Historicism and Scottish Enlightenment, to Goethe, to German theological theory, to the *Weimarer Klassik* and German Idealism, to geology and botanics, to economics, and to political theory. What he gleans from his almost obsessive passion for reading, he amasses in his journals and notebooks, that themselves become the quarry from which he recirculates his material first into his sermons – themselves indexed in an elaborate system of concordances –, then into the essays. At the same time, he prepares topic and key word lists of his journals and frequently recirculates sentences and passages from early essays into later essays – sometimes verbatim, sometimes with small alterations.

Because the structure of his work and writing does not conform to our preconceived notions of writerly development and systematic consistency, it cannot be presented as a chronological narrative (early radical Emerson to late acquiescent Emerson, idealist Emerson to pragmatist Emerson, from the "method of man" to the "method of nature", etc.). Even if these tales of Emerson's development bring to light the way in which he stuck to some of his favourite topics, the course of Emerson's epistemological investigation and writerly experiment is never smooth or straightforward. His procedure of recycling earlier writing complicates any narrative of Emerson's intellectual development or maturation. If material from his early and somewhat naïve experiments with the typological template resurface in later essays, then, obviously, the supposed maturity of these essays is disturbed. More generally, one could argue that Emerson resists the unifying tendencies of typology and a more properly 'philosophical' systematics to propose a novel form of organization in his writing that is non-hierarchical or rhizomatic. Even if it is true that Emerson finds his topics early on and continues to read assiduously, it is not so much a development or a becoming more refined that characterizes his writing. Rather, it is a progressive complication, a progressive becoming critical (also of itself) that for me epitomizes Emerson's thought and writing. As a consequence, we also need to think of different 'Emersons' and not just of the one distinctively Emersonian "voice" or "mood" that Stanley Cavell has attempted to abstract from Emerson's essays (see Cavell 2003: 26). Rather, Emerson's writing presents us with a plurality of voices – their tones and pitches sometimes at odds with one another – and a conflagration of moods – not always reducible to a characteristically Emersonian sentiment.

Rather than to simply capitulate in front of the massive corpus of texts of Emerson's work and rather than to simply limit my focus to single sermons or

essays, this study proposes an approach that tries to trace terminological, thematic and poetological continuities and discrepancies not only within the single essay, but across a complicated network of re-circulations and re-figurations. This will mean that we "take the trouble of learning the language of the country we are visiting", to use a phrase coined by Mieke Bal (Bal 2002: 15). To learn Emerson's language, I will have to keep returning to important concepts and phrases to show how they acquire their significance both within single passages or within the argumentative structure of an essay, but also within the larger context of Emerson's writing. This obviously means a certain allowance for redundancy, since I need to at times read a passage twice to suggest how it links to different thematic strands in Emerson's work. It also means that I liberally skip the boundaries of a single essay where necessary.

While it is important to point out that my procedure itself comes as yet another refiguration of the material in Emerson's essays, it needs to be said that every reading of classic American literature is always also a reading of our previous reading of that literature. This is especially true of my own study, since it profits from work done on Emerson's writing in the last couple of decades. But as Emerson points out, every author necessarily "realizes and adds" (*W*, III, 11): American literature is essentially revisionist, even more so because in America each reading or writing needs to assess the previous writing's claim for a specifically 'American' literature *in its own time*, in its own cultural present. Some of my own revisions in this field will be only minute, others more pronounced. With a writing as concentrated and, at times, as aphoristic as Emerson's, however, even the inclusion of another sentence into a passage often cited may completely change the significance of that passage.

Engaging the canon of American literature has always also meant to engage a revisionism that is specific to the field. Indeed, to talk about the canon of American literature means precisely to revise that canon. Some time has passed, obviously, since Emerson has been newly added to this canon, and it seems that now the appeal of his work has faded and American studies have found other forums of exchange and innovation. After three decades of assault on the writing and the dogmas that formed what Matthiessen had termed the "American Renaissance" (Matthiessen 1968), American studies have moved on to fresher pastures, to 19th century women's literature or to early African-American writing, and many other aspects of American literary culture that are still left to be explored. I do not mean to devalue recent revisionism in the field, but it speaks of a dilemma that anyone engaging with the works of American Transcendentalists and especially with those of Emerson faces today: Is there a viable means of salvaging something from this wreckage?

Rather than to write a kind of memorial, I would propose to attempt to reclaim the urgency with which the period saw *itself*, both as a conceptual or philosophical

problem and as one of literary form. This would also mean that we reinvent or relocate the idea of a culturally virulent present that we may have lost in postmodern theory. Therefore, this study finds its focal point in what Emerson variously calls the "moment," the "present age," or the "to-day" and it asks of the consequence of a culture and a kind of writing that insists on the urgency of its own historical, political, and cultural moment. The problematics of a "spirit of the age" will thus be both the methodological avenue on which I approach this writing, as well as the very problem or focus of the writing that I study.

This is not to say that I do not acknowledge the validity of earlier critiques of the universal claims of Emerson's writing and the canon of "American Transcendentalism" that it is a part of. I think that this study does itself contribute to this process of relativising. At the same time, however, I think we need to reassert a certain fascination with literature and how it concerns itself with transporting the ungoverned potentialities of a present moment into a form of writing. My text consequently seeks not only to present an account of Emerson's thematic or philosophical interests, it also attempts to describe how literary texts themselves give form to such a kind of momentary experience. I must therefore also develop a practice of seizing on moments in literature that, on the one hand, seem ineffable but whose meaning, on the other hand, needs to be put into words. This practice, I will maintain, is both my method and my object of enquiry. As a consequence, I am not interested in the kind of discipline that close reading grants. Rather, I want to explore a practice in which the attention that the close reading affords is already bound up with the way in which the text performs its meaning. And this procedure is not just a matter of personal reading preferences: Emerson, in his own time, was strongly influenced by a theory of hermeneutics and, more specifically, by a hermeneutics of the moment. How literature can give form to the moment of a present not yet absorbed within historical discourses, that is precisely one of the challenges that Emerson's poetics faces.

Emerson's poetics thus forces us to imagine an alternative to the prudishness of academic theory and its professionalized ways of wresting sense from texts. When professionalized practices of reading have tended to replace the vicissitudes of experience and an engagement with the world in favour of an increasing self-reflexivity, they have ignored that literature is also a mode of discourse that allows for a representation and creative refiguration of experience. Obviously, the evasion of reality in the literary sciences has also been amplified by the waning of precisely those theoretical discourses that take recourse to reality or the real (Psychoanalysis, Marxist criticism, etc.). But my insistence on the 'a-theoretical' quality of experience and on the moment of a present not yet accustomed to historical narratives is, as I hope to show in the following, not meant to suggest a general debunking of theory. Rather, it asks us to reconsider theory's very own historical moment, that is, the way in which our theorizing is caught up in the

theorizing of the texts that we read. Emerson is a good starting point here because we cannot fail to acknowledge how his writing is always already both theoretical and historic.

I will open this book with an account of how Ralph Waldo Emerson receives a certain historical kind of writing and how he translates it into a poetics of 'America' (Chapter One: "The 'spirit of the age' and Emerson's *zwei Seelen*" and Chapter Two: "The scholar and the 'age of introversion'"). Here, I will follow the brief trajectory of Emerson's writing in the first half of the nineteenth century to provide something one could call, following Claude Lévi-Strauss, a "hot chronology" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 259): Emerson's emergence as a writer is linked to a period of particular eventfulness whose amount of textual production is hardly proportionate to the length of the period. The first two chapters of this book are, however, not about this eventfulness *per se,* but about how Emerson thinks he may transport it into a kind of writing. It therefore ask not only how a certain historicism emerged in America, but how American writers themselves considered their writing to be historic, *both writing and making history*. I am consequently interested in a double bind that I read as characteristic of Emerson's writing: how is literature historicist, how does it 'representatively' express a "spirit of the age," and how does it, on the other, itself produce this very spirit, make it by writing it? I will show how Emerson resists the historicist's aim at rationalizing, at giving a total account of a period. Emerson's historicism is critical, that is, it does not always or not yet understand what is at stake in the historical narrative that it tells. But while it may go beyond 'representative' ways of writing about 'America' in its creative refiguration of the potentialities of the present moment, it nevertheless clearly belongs to a certain historical moment, even if Emerson can only think of this moment as a kind of emergence yet to be fully realized. "Poetry" or "literature" – and precisely *not* historical discourses –, for Emerson, are the means that he thinks may be able to give form to such an unprecedented experience of the event of the present. And his poetics conceives of itself as an abandonment precisely to that which is yet unregimented by historical discourse and, simultaneously, opens the field of historical articulations for a creative, "incalculable" (*EL*, II, 9) refiguration, that itself becomes the condition of the possibility of *all* history.

I will therefore also attempt to show that we are generally blind to a problem in Romanticism and, especially, in American Romanticism. Whenever we attempt to situate this writing historically, we may in fact already be caught up in the ideologies of historicism that it purports itself. As James Chandler points out, Romanticism is "itself constituted as a practice of specifying the dated state of historical cultures in and as literary texts" (Chandler 1998: 4-5). Historicist thinking leans toward making a work's relation to its contemporary moment transparent. It tries to imaginatively situate a work's concerns within the larger framework of a more general *Zeitgeist* and attempts to present individual texts as 'representative'

expressions of the culture in which they were produced. But historicism does generally not account for the eventuality where a culture and its literary expression can *not* effectively figure the structure of such a commonsensical "spirit of the age". In fact, there are recurring moments in history when precisely the "spirit of the age" is no longer simply a matter of course, but eludes any kind of 'representative' description. Obviously, historicism's positivism is unavoidable, because the discourse of literary studies is never exempted from a kind of obligation to narrate, to link up cause and effect, individual aspects of culture and their representation in literature. But I think that another side of historicism – and a constituent of it from its very beginning at the end of the eighteenth century – remains yet to be investigated: What do we do with texts that precisely fail to make themselves understood historically? As Emerson puts the questions in "Fate":

> "It chanced during one winter a few years ago, that our cities were bent on discussing the theory of the Age. By an odd coincidence, four or five noted men were each reading a discourse to the citizens of Boston or New York, on the Spirit of the Times. It so happened that the subject had the same prominence in some remarkable pamphlets and journals issued in London in the same season. To me, however, the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live? We are incompetent to solve the times." (*W*, VI, 3)

What are the poetic implications of such a failure of the historicist relation of text and context, culture and time? Instead of a historicist "return to history" as a return to historical "specificity," this study suggests that we look precisely at how the texts of the American Renaissance in their attempts at specifying a "spirit of the age" subvert the very historicist and ideological dogma that they put forward. Of course we can never simply forget about what one could call the documentary or contemporary aspect of a work of art. It is a general requirement for recognizing a given work's participation in the culture of its time. It will, however, not explain the ways in which a work of art problematises its relation to history, even presents history as unreadable, or tries to imagine a state beyond the historic situation of its age. The incapacity to render a history or culture readable, the failure to say, in Emerson's case, what the "spirit" of one's age is, the failure to link up cause and effect in a given culture and thus, the failure to make a contemporary world transparent: these, if we recognize their self-reflexive tendency, may nevertheless be central aspects of a self-consciously complex literary culture. In other words: Especially in its failure to make the "spirit of the age" intelligible, this writing proves to be a significant contribution towards the ways in which a society conceptualizes its own historical moment. If we concede this kind of reflexivity, and if we are willing to acknowledge that, at times, the "spirit of the age" is ambivalent, then we also need to recognize these as 'representative' elements of a "spirit of the age," as modes of historicist thought in a given epoch.

One should therefore be careful not to quickly coerce all facts and symptoms of a time into a system of intelligibility or representativeness, especially if we are

concerned with cultures that try to (historically) think about the difficult passage of an epochal threshold. To render the precariousness of such a passage intelligible would mean precisely not to gloss over the contingency involved in this passage and to expose that which cannot be made commensurate with the historical narrative out of which the new age may be produced. Because the epochal turn ask for a different kind of writing that imagines the new possibilities of the coming age, it needs to be creative, poetic, or literary, rather than historical or documentary. Instead of looking at representative ways of historically documenting the spirit of an age, we need to therefore pay attention to the poetic procedures that an age uses *to make its history by writing it*. The aim of this study is therefore to reinstitute the failure of the historicist relation as a reinvigoration of poetic language. Emerson does not lament that we cannot give a representative answer to the question "Where do we find ourselves?" (*W*, III, 45). Rather, the failure of the historicist relation in Emerson becomes the moment in which Emerson locates the poetic potential of a spontaneous organization of language, that – because it cannot be predetermined or pre-contained, because it is not yet itself historic – may open a future that is qualitatively different from both our past and our present. But because we can only account for the epochal turn *after the fact*, because we cannot calculate its advent, the epochal turn itself comes as a risky moment of refiguration, as an excessive poetic moment in which the hold of commonsensical discourses is "poetically" loosened and new ways of talking about the world become possible. Emerson variously conceives of this risky moment as a "gulf," a "verge," or an "abyss," but however risky he thinks it may be, to him this precarious moment in-between the strands of historical time is also the moment of poetic language, the moment in which poetry may potentially produce a new world.

The standard term to describe the interest of transcendentalist writers in America tended to be *ahistoricism*. With the renaissance of American studies and its ongoing re-evaluation of the work of the Transcendentalists – led by, among others, Michael Lopez, Len Gougenon, Sacvan Bercovitch, Carolyn Porter, Lawrence Buell, Barbara Packer, and David Robinson –, this commonplace has been profoundly challenged. These critics, in various ways, all attempt to effect, as Michael Lopez has termed it, a "de-transcendentalizing" of the Emerson image, and they all suggest that this is precisely achieved by a "return to history," that is, by locating Emerson within the historical, literary, and material culture of his time (see Lopez 1988). This has produced a multi-faceted image of an Emerson very much invested in the cultural and social concerns of his time. It has, however, gone unnoticed that the category of history, for Emerson is not entirely unproblematic. In the moment of the epochal refiguration, during the emergence of a new world that may or may not be 'America,' it is precisely the availability of history, the presence of the world – and how it can be made legible

'representatively' – that can no longer be taken for granted. The moment in which a world radically refigured announces itself is also, especially in Emerson, the moment of a profound scepticism in which the potential fulfilment of 'America's' brilliant promise is simultaneously the risk of its catastrophe. Even though I share Enrico Cadava's diagnosis of Emerson's "turn" to history in his *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Cadava 1997), I would therefore nevertheless argue that this turn generally is much more problematic since the availability of what we term history for him is never self-evident.

The third chapter of this study ("History, quotation, hermeneutics") elaborates the sources and consequences of Emerson's revision of contemporary historicism. It attempts to show how Emerson specifies the 'American' experience – though unquestionably a result of history - as the place of a poetic opening that is itself "in the present, above time" (*W*, II, 67). But it is precisely because the definition of 'America' in the eccentric moment of the epochal turn (towards 'America,' 'freedom,' or 'democracy') hinges on a poetic leap from tradition, that any account of 'America' must necessarily be referred back to itself. America's self-description as a democracy, consequently reinforces an attention to the potential of poetic language because it will precisely be America's readiness to poetically refigure itself that will guarantee its lasting success as a nation, as a political 'messiah' among nations, potentially bringing about the advent of democracy. We thus find in Emerson both a more general revision or criticism of historicism, as well as an insight into the prevalence or universality of interpretation in every historicism and all kinds of history.

Usually, histories of philosophy or hermeneutics start this tradition of a critically refined historicism and a hermeneutics of self-implication with Nietzsche's assertion in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* that there are no facts, only interpretations.[1] But Nietzsche's historicist critique – how he sees philosophy implied in the murky processes of interpretation and writing – has its precedent in Emerson, as Nietzsche himself repeatedly acknowledges. Nietzsche, both at the receiving end of seventy-five years of German historicist thought *and* an avid reader of Emerson's writing, exhibits the full potential of something that is already a problem in Emerson's ambiguous reception of European historicist and philological thought. We are thus concerned with a curious trans-atlantic detour, by way of which something eccentric is inserted into European epistemology and the continental school of philosophy. But it is precisely this eccentric something – the problem of 'America,' of 'freedom,' of 'democracy,' but also of 'poetry,' as we will see – that will return into it via the twin inlets of Nietzsche and Heidegger (who, in specific

1 See for example the following passage from Nietzsche's *Nachgelassene Fragmente*: "Gegen den Positivismus, welcher bei dem Phänomen stehen bleib 'es giebt nur Thatsachen', würde ich sagen: nein, gerade Thatsachen giebt es nicht, nur Interpretationen. Wir können kein Factum 'an sich' feststellen: vielleicht ist es ein Unsinn, so etwas zu wollen." (*KSA*, XII, 315).

ways, have themselves made 'America' the place of their epistemological critiques). My study will repeatedly return to the philosophy of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and, to a lesser degree, Hegel, because they allow me to explain some of the conceptual problems that Emerson encounters in his writing. While this study is primarily about Emerson's poetic refiguration of 'America' and not about its dispersed echo in European philosophy, I will juxtapose Emerson's argument with that of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger in order to make explicit how unusually early Emerson came across a number of topics that are both central to his project – the renewal of 'America' – as well as to that of the more philosophical or systematic project of these European philosophers – namely that of a critique of metaphysics. It is precisely because the name 'America' collects, in Emerson's essays, a number of tendencies that, *avant la lettre*, go against the grain of metaphysics that I am interested in this trans-atlantic exchange.

I take my cue here from Stanley Cavell, who suggests that Heidegger, if apocryphically, reads Emerson, or rather, that he reads Emerson through Nietzsche. In other words: Nietzsche – who is said to have carried an edition of Emerson's essays in his coat pocket at all times, who copied passages from Emerson's essays into his journals, and whose early essays "Fatum und Geschichte" and "Willensfreiheit und Fatum" present a synthesis of Emersonian topics – looks to Emerson in an attempt to sort out his own dissatisfaction with historicism and hermeneutics. Heidegger, in his large-scale project of a comprehensive critique and reformatting of traditional metaphysics, again refigures some of the problems that Nietzsche had already gleaned from Emerson. The problem that runs through this exchange is the irreducible historicity of understanding as well as the problem of a general perspectivism of all interpretation. Furthermore, as Cavell remarks: "So I am faced with the spectacle of Heidegger's in effect – unknowingly – facing certain of Emerson's words, guiding himself in these fateful years by sins from, of all places, the waste of America" (1995: 41). In my analysis, I will complement Cavell's account of America's *Abfall* from Europe and of America as the *Abfall* of Europe by Hegel's (dis)qualification of America as Europe's "Überschuss" (*TWA,* XII, 109), by Nietzsche's (dis)qualification of the American way of life and, more specifically, in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, of the American promise of "allgemeine Wohlfahrt" as "Brechmittel," (*KSA*, V, 165), as well as by Heidegger's denigration of what he considers the "Weltverdüsterung" (*GA*, 40, 34) inherent to American ideology.

All of these European thinkers are fascinated and, to a certain degree, also disgusted by America because it comes as a nation and cultural concept that refutes historicist dogma as well as its assumption that a transparent kind of historical understanding can be posited. 'America' here becomes the disturbing case study that proves that history could also have proceeded otherwise. 'America' presents the unprecedented case of a country that produces its own history, that *produces*

itself out of itself, by way of a continual process of self-implication. In the writing of European philosophers, it therefore figures as a challenge to teleologic concepts of history, because its political forms are not the result of a governed process of improvement, as the European nation state had seen it in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, but the result of a continual *self-referral* and *self-actualization*.

If I talk about hermeneutics, then, I do so not in the sense of an art or *techné* of interpretation, not in the sense of an instrumental practice but, rather, as Heidegger would have it, as a "mode of revealing" (Heidegger 1993: 319), as the (self-reflexive) questioning of how, at any given time, we are as interpreters (or readers, or writers) in the world. Emerson's hermeneutics – itself, as I will show, a re-evaluation and revision of the evolving discipline of hermeneutics in his time (Böhme, Herder, Schleiermacher) – makes obvious that because American culture is itself historical, an elaboration of American culture cannot simply tell its genealogy but must, inevitably, ask what it means to be American at any given moment. In other words, a definition of American culture does not consist in a genetic account of the meaning of 'America.' Rather, in order to understand what 'America' has meant at any given time, it needs to deconstruct the terms of 'America' to show how they are themselves historic. To do this, Emerson's exploration also needs to evaluate these terms by poetically rearranging them into new constellations so that their newly acquired significance questions the totality of 'American culture' and the supposedly self-evident nature of common sense in 'America'.

America's reinvention, as Emerson imagines it, can thus not simply take recourse to the facts of American life. It does not simply consist in making the present cultural reality correspond with the political constitution of the American republic. Precisely because Americans cannot get a fix on the "spirit of the age," precisely because the character of their nation eludes them when they "clutch hardest" (*W*, III, 49), as Emerson phrases it, they need to enter into a more "radical correspondence" (*W*, I, 29) so that a qualitatively different future will be possible. "[T]he most unhandsome part of our condition" (*W*, III, 49), as Emerson argues, is that Americans are presented with a "verge" precisely when they look at the ordinary circumstances of their lives, when they try to identify what, specifically or characteristically, 'America' is all about. As Stanley Cavell has argued, American must thus confront the field of ordinary experience, or rather, acknowledge what Cavell calls the "uncanniness" of ordinary life (Cavell 1988). And it is only by passing through this ambivalent and unintelligible everydayness that a new interpretation of their being-in-the-world is made possible. This is why I will repeatedly return to the notion of a specifically American *Selbstverständlichkeit* (*self-understanding*) and *Selbstbezüglichkeit* (*self-implication*), and how it is historically produced. What is at stake in this specifically American self-implication is how 'America' understands itself and how 'America' – both as a nation and as a

concept – has to be understood as precisely a result of a procedure of self-implication. We will see, furthermore, that the advent of the 'American' age as an age of democracy in Emerson is also dependant upon this kind of self-implication, upon how America makes itself understood or, as the last chapter will ask, how it insists on making itself understood all over again.

In contemporary American political discourse, this Emersonian topos of self-implication has solidified into a political programme, for example when Barak Obama in the running up to the 2008 presidential elections repeatedly invokes the mantra of "We are the change that we seek". Obama obviously exploits this gesture of a kind of self-registration to suggest his own legacy as standing in a line with that of the great sermon teachers that brought about America's first 'native' culture and literature. But while Obama's formula ("We are the ones we have been waiting for," "Our time has come") envisions the American promise as already fulfilled, its change already accomplished in America's political subjects, in Emerson this self-implication signals a cultural logic that is much more precarious since it does not provide a stable ground from which to project a political programmatics for America.[2] Rather, it presents Americans with a "verge" (*W*, II, 315), it asks for a kind of thinking or writing that is itself, to use Heidegger's term, "ab-gründig" (*GA*, 28, 136), self-reflexively investigating the grounds of its assertions so as to discover that what it is, is precisely the result not of a political calculus but of a continual self-reflection.

And Emerson knows that for this process of self-implication not to itself settle into a normative or authoritarian cultural dogma, it needs to confront a "force" or "power" that will deflect 'America' from its projected course. To prevent the sedimentation of its cultural forms and to bring about the fleeting forms that secure the freedom of democracy, in other words, for 'America' to fully life up to its promise, it must be continually, as Emerson phrases it in "Circles," "unsettled":

> "This old age ought not to creep on a human mind. In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit. No love can be bound by oath or covenant to secure it against a higher love. No truth so sublime but it may be trivial to-morrow in the light of new thoughts. People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." (*W*, II, 319-320)

America's advent as a nation and, more specifically, as a democracy, is thus not so much a question of a political process instrumentally governed, but a process of "emergence" ("the coming only is sacred"): it is not about a consolidation of facts or about a concretization of the ideals set forward by its constitution, but rather about the confrontation of a potential precisely not yet incorporated into the

2 For a critical assessment of Obama's formula "We are the change that we seek," see Joe Klein, "Inspiration vs. Substance" (Klein 2008). For a transcript of Obama's Super Tuesday speech, see Barak Obama, "Our Time Has Come" (Obama 2008).

present state of culture. And if America's future cannot be anticipated, this also means that it is incalculable, irreducible to historical narratives or a notion of historical progress. To conceptualize America's exceptional or eccentric moment in history, "in the present, above time," Emerson returns repeatedly to what he variously calls "life," "love," "experience," "nature," "poetry," etc.: In Emerson's writing, they all function as reserves of future meaning, an ungoverned potential for signification out of which America can reinvent or refigure itself. But in order to tap into this potential and to prevent it from being arrested within an authoritarian discourse, writing must itself open up towards a "radical correspondence," and the writer must be poetically responsive towards everything that is not yet assimilated into America's commonsensical discourses.

Because this "radical correspondence" cannot be the result of a political programme, America's future is one that must be produced "poetically," time and again. In Emerson, this presupposes a specific writerly ethos, namely one of poetic experimentation. As he phrases it in "Circles": "I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back" (*W*, II, 318). Emerson here anticipates the kind of philosophical problem that will later puzzle Nietzsche and Heidegger. If the world is the result of our own poetic creation, then obviously, we must also confront the danger of a more risky perspectivism.[3] "The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth" (*W*, II, 279), Emerson argues, an insight that will later be echoed by Nietzsche who argues that "[z]u jeder Seele gehört eine andere Welt" (*KSA* 4, 272). This, in turn, is elaborately analysed by Heidegger in different places, most consistently in *Logik. Die Frage nach der Wahrheit* (*GA,* 21) where he deals with the *Eigentlichkeit* of being.

> "Das Dasein [ist] ständig 'mehr' als es tatsächlich ist, wollte man es als Vorhandenes in seinem Seinsbestand registrieren. Es ist aber nie mehr, als es faktisch ist, weil zu seiner Faktizität das Seinkönnen wesenhaft gehört. […] Und nur weil das Sein des Da durch das Verstehen und dessen Entwurfscharakter seine Konstitution erhält, weil es ist, was es wird, bzw. nicht wird, kann es verstehend ihm selbst sagen: ‚werde, was du bist!'" (*SZ* 145, vgl. *GA*, 21, 413).

Cavell applies this "become what you are" to Emerson's peculiar individualism and his project of moral perfectionism. And in fact, Emerson phrases a similar insight in his journal when he reminds himself to consistently "[w]rite what you are" (*J*, IX, 177). Cavell in the context of this Emersonian "become what you are" speaks of Emerson's "onward thinking" (see Cavell 1992: 136-137), and I think that this term

3 This perspectivism, as Stanley Cavell has argued convincingly, also holds the danger of a characteristically Emersonian skepticism, the danger, that the world that I imagine, is only a figment of my own imagination and not the kind of shared communal vision that 'America' characteristically announces. For Stanley Cavell's comments on Emersonian skepticism, see Cavell's *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990) and his comments in *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (1995). For a comprehensive study of Emersonian skepticism, see John Michael's *Emerson and Skepticism* (1988).

can be applied not only to Emerson's reconception of American individualism but also to the nature and problem of historical understanding in his writings. Cavell takes recourse to Heidegger's getting ourselves "on the way", *Unterwegssein*, as a mode of *Vollzug*, that can also be a poetic performance ("write what you are"). Irreducible to a linear organization of history, its promise or potential has to be grasped in the *here and now* of the present, and only our grasping of this *here and now* (as weak or tentative that this grasp may be) will open a different future. And indeed, as I will point out, this comes very close to the kind of *Hermeneutik der Faktizität* in early Heidegger, a hermeneutics, that conceptualizes the movement or *Bewegung* of factical life as already bound up with our acts of understanding it (see *GA* 63, esp. 9-16). Emerson says that "[l]ife is an ecstasy" (*W*, VI, 41), a form that consistently goes beyond itself. Even if he sees a certain risk that this ecstasy may atomize the brilliant communal vision of America into a myriad of individual destinies, he nevertheless thinks that every American must confront this "greater possibility" (*W*, II, 306) in order to enable the arrival of the American age, in order to potentially enable the advent of 'democracy' or a specifically American 'freedom'.

In chapters four ("Towards a 'radical correspondence'") and five ("The aporia of passage and the future of American democracy"), I will elaborate these findings and I will show how Emerson's poetics of "radical correspondence" needs to be read politically. While Emerson is, rhetorically or poetically speaking, after potential moments of *troping* in which American language digresses from its prior uses, this focus on language's potential for refiguration in Emerson is also the "groundless ground" (*LL*, II, 280) upon which he thinks an American politics can be built, even if this will not make for a political programmatics once and for all. At a moment when the democratic project in the eyes of many Americans came under the influence of a certain sedimentation, when the window of opportunity that the revolution had opened slowly began to close and the opportunities for radical democratic development began to grow sparse, Emerson opts for the undecidability of the writer's confrontation with "nature," with "experience," with "life," that is, with the ordinary fields of social practices precisely not governed by a political programmatics. We may tap into this potential, I take Emerson to say, only if we are willing to "poetically" correspond with this incalculable "nature". "Nature," or "experience," or "life" – as spaces exempted from meaning beyond our everyday dealings with them – here consequently denominate a presence that interacts with ours, and that, if it is figured poetically, questions its very form. It comes as a divergent field of social praxis that continually reminds us of everything that is not reducible to a (philosophical) systematics or (political) programmatics. It therefore also functions as a corrective that counters any intentional or instrumental notion of politics.

I conclude my study thus not with one of the favoured returns to politics that we have grown accustomed to in contemporary cultural and literary studies. Also, I do not (re)discover a 'political' Emerson. Rather, I want to show how it is precisely a poetic Emerson that is inherently political. In other words, I am interested in Emerson's refusal of a systematic politics and his favouring of an interest in the poetic as a posture that keeps the field of politics open because it continually questions and refigures its attributions. Poetry, because it must necessarily remain implied in the vicissitudes of language, cannot but work against the reduction of particulars to universal forms that is the inevitable sign of any politics. And because poetry does not dismiss language if it fails to express some final truth, it circumscribes the space of a democratic politics. Following Jacques Derrida's comments on the nature of democracy as a political form yet-to-come, *à-venir*, I will argue that it is, to use Derrida's words, the "absence of a proper form, of an eidos, of an appropriate paradigm, of a definitive turn, of a proper meaning or essence and, at the same time, the obligation to have only turns, rounds, tropes, strophes of itself" (Derrida 2005: 74), in short, that it is the poetic constitution of democracy that makes for its specific political promise or hope. Because this promise cannot be fixed in a definite constitutional utterance, Americans must continue to poetically invest the name and notion of 'America' with meaning. They need to poetically "unsettle," as Emerson has it, prior designations of 'America' in order to keep its democratic promise alive.

The possibility to say "I no longer believe this", to come back to Emerson's remark, as a little poetic experiment *in nuce* also contains a theory of Emerson's politics. It tells us that we must unsettle the things that have been said, even if these words were ours. And it tells us that a political or philosophical enterprise can only be kept open for the future inclusion of what is not yet a part of it, if we continually test its assertions and refute them if they do no longer correspond with what we think in the present hour, "to-day".

One

The "Spirit of the Age" and Emerson's *zwei Seelen*

> "It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated."
>
> – Homi Bhabha

Emerson's assessment of his time is remarkably ambivalent. When Emerson anonymously publishes *Nature* in 1836, he begins by way of a pronounced condemnation of the culture of his time: "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism" (*W*, I, 3). Looking back some thirty years later in "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," however, Emerson describes the beginnings of Transcendentalism as a time in which "[t]he ancient manners were giving way" and in which "there grew a certain tenderness on the people, not before remarked" (*W*, X, 325). He adds that "the key to the period appeared to be that the mind had become aware of itself. Men grew reflective and intellectual. There was a new consciousness" (*W*, X, 326). Emerson's earlier assessment describes the times in which his work emerges as a time when all change and cultural innovation is stalled in favour of an affirmation of tradition and when American culture is pervaded by a strong sense of stagnation. The passages from "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," on the other hand, identify Emerson's forming years as a time of hope and change, a time in which he gladly witnesses the emergence of new "manners," new intellectual categories and, potentially, a "new consciousness" (*W*, X, 326). Earlier, in the late 1840s, Emerson makes a similar assessment when he remarks that "[w]ith this din of opinion and debate, there was a keener scrutiny of institutions and domestic life than any we had known" (*W*, III, 253).

What then, I want to ask, is Emerson's and/or Transcendentalism's 'true' moment? What is the cultural spirit from which Emerson's work emerges and for which it stands, 'representatively'? The question is not merely of biographical relevance and the answer to it, as we will see, does not simply tell the stock story of the adolescent radical growing into the conciliatory writer of age, who with a mild eye looks back upon his early years of youthful radicalism. Rather, I am going to

argue in this chapter that the problem of defining or specifying a "spirit of the age" lies in fact at the heart of Emerson's interest and that it is a combination of both moments – that of youthful radicalism as well as that of matured acquiescence – that provide the signature of Emerson's and Transcendentalism's times. Emerson's ambivalent assessment of his time thus speaks simultaneously of a feeling of stagnation as well as of a hope for change and for an opening towards an American future that is yet unknown, unachieved.

More significantly, this experience of an eventful present containing conflicting historical or cultural temporalities also pertains to a problem of cultural and historical "specificity": it speaks of a culture that is at pains to assess or take hold of the 'representativity' of its contemporary experience, that finds it difficult to express, 'representatively,' its 'spirit of the time'. In the American context and especially for what Sacvan Bercovitch has called "the symbolic construction of America" (Bercovitch 1993), the recognition of such a 'representatively' American experience is obviously of vital importance since America's age and the existence of a culture specifically 'American' hinges precisely on, as Stanley Cavell has termed it in his *The Senses of Walden*, the identification of America's "crossing" or "leaping" (1992: 136) from European culture and its assertion of a different, that is, 'American' culture.

Emerson's most pronounced analysis of the ambivalent moment of America's present and of the reality of historical change occurs in his lecture on "The Times," where he uses epochal terms to specify the undecided character of his time between tradition and change. He sees, in his time, "a war between intellect and affection," a veritable "crack in Nature" (*W*, X, 325), and argues that his time represents that moment in history, recurring occasionally, when "the party of the Past" and "the party of the Future" (*W*, X, 325) and the respective attitudes of traditionalism and radicalism clash with one another. While this collision defines the very process of history, it features most prominently when a culture's destiny is undecided, when a culture's present moment offers a choice of conflicting future destinies and possibilities. Such "eras of activity" (*W*, X, 325), as Emerson calls them, are symptomatic of a period of transition, of a passage from what was to what is yet to come. And there are moments in which this conflict of the past and the future becomes so urgent, that it becomes the very preoccupation of a culture, as Emerson points out: "At times the resistance is reanimated, the schism runs under the world and appears in Literature, Philosophy, Church, State and social customs" (*W*, X, 325). America or American culture in Emerson's diagnosis consequently finds itself in a sort of interregnum, in, to use Homi Bhabha's term (Bhabha 1994: 2), an "interstitial" period in-between epochs or cultures in which something new is about to appear while the old has not quite loosened its grip yet. According to Emerson, contemporary American culture is precisely located in

such an interval, about to cross the threshold into a new era. It is, as he describes this moment of transition in "Circles": on "the verge of to-day" (*W*, II, 315).

This identification of a moment *in-between* cultures and cultural temporalities is not exclusive to Emerson, it also pertains to the rest of the heterogeneous group that assembles under the auspices of a "Transcendentalism." They all feel that they are "living on the threshold of profound and glorious change," as George Hochfield has argued, and "wrote of America as though its destiny was to be a messiah among the nations" (Hochfield 1966: xi, xxvii). Emerson formulation of the "verge of to-day," however, adds a more troubled or ambivalent note to this celebration of America's present: for him, the present moment is not decided, it is a present moment that, while not completely done with the past, has not yet realized its coming state. And it is precisely this *con-temporaneity*, this falling together of incommensurable 'stratums' of time – of both the past and the future – in the immediacy of a lived present that is the temporal signature of what Emerson variably calls the "to-day," the "present" or, simply, the "moment."[1] His work is an examination of this peculiar *contemporaneity* as *con-temporality,* of the potentiality of the present moment at the crossroads or, rather, in-between the directions of historical time.

In "The Times," Emerson likens his endeavour to find a suitable expression for the precarious moment of the present to that of the Daguerreotypist who, "with camera-obscura and silver plate, begins to traverse the land." And he proposes that in order to achieve the immediacy of presentation that is to become the genius of photography, the writer needs to "set up [...] Camera also, and let the sun paint the people" (*W*, I, 264). Emerson thus associates his project of writing about America's contemporary moment with the undertakings of the surveyors, landscape painters, mappers and, as of the late forties, photographers that begin to assemble a comprehensive picture of their country.[2] But while the geographic surveys conceive of America first in Pacific terms and later in terms of the American interior and the West – that is: in geographical terms –, Emerson's description of the nation is more interested in establishing a map or portrait of America's conflicting *cultural* destinies in the present.

The reference to the early daguerreotypists in "The Times" is nevertheless telling and certainly not a casual one: The daguerreotypist, for the first time, is able to arrest the world directly on the metal plate, but what is documented – and this applies exclusively to the Daguerreotype with its long intervals of exposure – also gives form to or documents a certain duration insofar as the graininess and haziness of the picture implies the process of time passing. The daguerreotype

1 On the metaphor of "Zeitschichten," see Reinhart Koselleck "Einleitung" in *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Gadamer 2000: 9-16).

2 One would have to add to this list the bureaucrats that carried out the 1840 United States Federal Census. For the first time, the 1840 census ascertained a comprehensive summary of America's infrastructure, population and geographical expansion.

consequently suggests both the materiality of the moment documented in the picture as well as the very ephemerality of the impression left on the plate. The incomplete articulation of the daguerreotype – both eye-stopping and transitory, sharply defined at the centre but blurry at the margins –, for Emerson corresponds to his own search for a new cultural *poiesis* adequate to a contemporary experience of America.[3]

Emerson's interest in the daguerreotype suggests that the relevance of such a new cultural *poiesis* does not so much consist in providing a new *Weltanschauung* in the sense of providing a comprehensive picture of the contemporary moment. Rather, it is a question of approaching the world as fundamentally open, changing, and transitory. It comes as no surprise then, that the phrase "canvas of Time" (*W*, I, 265) in Emerson's essay is quickly replaced by the term of the "sketch" (*W*, I, 265): what is at stake here is thus not so much a description of the country as an attempt to find modes of writing that will give an adequate expression of the transitoriness of America's present moment. While the survey expeditions trek through a vast and formerly unknown landscape to claim it as American ground once and for all, Emerson is not interested in a lasting description or definition of 'America,' rather, he wants to document the fleeting expressions of the present moment. His writerly project does consequently not aim at establishing an exhaustive account of his time or a kind of comprehensive *Zeitdiagnose*, rather, as he phrases his ambition in the lecture on "The Times", "as each well-known form flitted for a moment across the wall, we should have a series of sketches which would report to the next ages the color and quality of ours" (*W*, I, 265).

His allusion to the daguerreotype and the sketch suggest two characteristic elements of the new aesthetics that Emerson envisions: specificity and ephemerality. Just as a sketch preserves something of the urgency of the specific historic moment in which it was conceived, so does Emerson's writing attempt to conserve the immediacy of the present moment that it writes about as a mode of writing. And just as the daguerreotypist can only produce a latent image that will then have to be developed into a picture by additional chemical processes, Emerson seeks to find modes of writing that reproduce, for the reader, the immediacy of America's eventful present *in writing*. The difficulty of the project to make America present to itself, then, for Emerson consists not so much in a problem of mimesis or 'representativity'. Just as Emerson describes photography's process and its latent imaging as a "strange" process – "The strangeness of the discovery is that Daguerre should have known that a picture was there even when he could not see any" (*J*, VI, 110) –, Emerson's struggle will be one of finding

3 As Beaumont Newhall and John Wood have noted, Americans saw the daguerreotype as an important element of new national aesthetics. See Wood's *America and the Daguerrotype* (1995) and Newhall's *The Daguerreotype in America* (1976). On Emerson's interest in early forms of photography, see Sean Ross Meehan's excellent article on "Emerson's Photographic Thinking" (2006).

modes of writing that will express the restlessness and fluidity of the experience of being "on the verge of to-day".

If Emerson's assessment of his times is ambivalent, then it is because for him, the experience of being on the verge of to-day, necessarily consists of contradictory or even incommensurable sentiments. It is no accident that Emerson should supplant the term "canvas" with that of the "sketch": He is well aware that these conflicting sentiments cannot ultimately be integrated within the grander design of a historical narrative. Rather, it is within the provisional form of the sketch that some of the troubled spirit of the times can be documented. Emerson's writing on the verge of to-day consequently is more interested in the mixed form of a present in which "fragments" – as remainders of the past – and "hints" (*W*, I, 265) – as weak suggestions of what is yet to come – make up a present, that can never be entirely present to itself.

And this is precisely the present that forms the conflictual stage upon which he imagines his 'America' and that poses the challenge which his writing needs to answer. Emerson, consequently, can be both: radical and committed reformer deeply involved in and as intrigued by the advent of the new, as well as distant observer and apologist, knowing that even in our boldest strides towards the new, we cannot completely leave the past behind us. And it is this fundamental and *a priori* self-difference of the present with itself that makes it impossible to comprehensively account for it in writing. As a consequence, it should come as no surprise if it should prove impossible to identify the one Emerson – even if we refer to 'Emerson' for convenience's sake: just as Emerson's 'Americas' are always 'many,' so is Emerson's ambivalent, undecided or contradictory, sometimes inconsistent characterization of his time itself 'representative' of an America essentially unsettled. It speaks of the heterogeneous moment of a present in which the common destiny is rapidly turning into a multitude of conflicting individual destinies that can no longer be extrapolated into a homogeneous cultural project named 'America'.

Indeed, Emerson's assessment of his time is strangely inconclusive and critics have variously characterized him as either the very foundational genius of a specifically 'American' literary tradition or its first eccentric or, even, its first outspoken heretic. If the last qualification is correct with regards to Emerson's position *vis-à-vis* the dogmas of the Unitarian church, taking him to be the solitary exponent of an eccentric or even idiosyncratic view of American society and

culture somewhat misses the point.[4] In fact, Emerson understood himself to be part of a culture that itself, as a whole, considered its very own moment *eccentric*, poised on a threshold where tradition was no longer self-explanatory, the culture's traditional narratives of a shared communal vision being exposed to a multiplication of individual antagonistic destinies in the present moment.

In his essay on "The American Scholar," Emerson thus locates American culture precisely within this eccentric, interstitial or ruptural space of an epochal threshold, posed between the splendid promise of an American future and its debt to (European) tradition.

> "Perhaps the time is already come when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." (*W*, I, 81)

Emerson temporally qualifies America's state of transition as a "postponed expectation." America, in the present, is thus both still a brilliant promise as well as the constant deferral of that promise in ordinary life. And as a result of these ambivalent or antagonistic forces, America's future is undecided yet. However, Emerson's assessment of his era as essentially transitional and undecided is not merely a symptom of his own private penchant for eccentric positions, it is the symptom of a culture that considers itself as eccentric with regards to its traditions. Emerson is consequently not the outspoken radical and, as Robert Milder rightly points out, "his practical politics were instinctively conservative" (Milder 1999: 49), but he nevertheless accomplishes what Giles Gunn has called Emerson's "thinking across culture" (Gunn 1992), that is, he attempts to expose a contradictory potential in the contemporary moment so that by rearranging the given terms of his culture into new constellations, he may come up with a potentially antithetical assessment of America's present situation.[5] Familiar with the kinds of historical writing that became popular at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, Emerson is thus not

4 On October 28, 1832, the Proprietors of Second Church in Boston dissolved Emerson's pastoral connexion because he had, in a sermon preached several weeks earlier, explained that he could no longer administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in good conscience. In a close textual and historical analysis, he had argued that evidence from the bible implies that "Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for perpetual observance when he ate the Passover with his disciples," and that, very much like the dogma of the Trinity, the ordinance unreasonably shifted attention from God to his "Mediator." Furthermore, he insisted that it was a ritual specific to a particular time and place that had long since passed and therefore had to be considered a distraction from religious life in Boston in 1832. Reading the text for the day literally – Romans 14:17: "The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness and peace and joy in the holy ghost." "This particular ordinance," Emerson insisted, "is not consistent with the spirit of Christianity." Even tough Emerson added that his refusal to perform the Lord's supper were not out of a "hostility to this institution [i.e. the Unitarian Church]" (*W*, XI, 20), his statements caused an outrage among the Second Church, an outrage that would cause Emerson to leave his ministry at the end of the same year.

5 On the question of Emerson's radicalism, see also Matthiessen's classic *American Renaissance. Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1968: 3-75).

merely a symptom of his time but, rather, manages to historically think about the contemporary moment, as Milder points out:

> "Far from being a mere symptom or signpost of history, Emerson was himself a historical thinker, conscious of the age both microhistorically in its immediate events and macrohistorically as these assumed significance within the kind of epochal analysis advanced in other frameworks by Tocqueville and Marx." (1999: 49)

But we will also see that Emerson realizes in his essays that epochal analyses – in literature as well as in literary history – are never 'innocent' or, for that matter, 'uninvolved': while later attempts at defining the American strain in literature tended to presuppose a characteristic kind of ahistoricism, Emerson's writing makes obvious that we cannot suppress or neglect the fact that American literature itself emerges as a particular kind of historical writing. Consequently, our attempts at providing a history for American literature and at locating individual writers within that history are therefore themselves already bound up with the very nature of American literature. Furthermore, and this is a point I will repeatedly return to, the concept of 'America' itself, as it is developed by Emerson and his contemporaries, is precisely a historical mode, one that is made self-reflexive, "critical," as Emerson would say, by way of its elaboration in literature and, later, philosophy.

Matthiessen's coinage of an "American Renaissance" in his *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1968) is therefore something of a misnomer: It locates a rebirth where there is instead the more complex process of America's self-implication in the ways in which it makes itself understood – historically, aesthetically, but also, as we have seen, 'geographically,' etc. Also, Matthiessen's study suggests that within a very short period of time and through the contribution of only a few ingenious minds, a supposedly novel cultural paradigm was simply created out of the blue.[6] Although Matthiessen's book at the time may have been helpful in bringing to attention a group of writings that had until then been largely overlooked, I think that it wrongly identifies an ardent enthusiasm for a new American literature as the only "spirit" of the age. Emerson and other writers of the age consider the development of a self-consciously American literature to be a much more painstaking and painstakingly slow process. For them, this process has only just begun and its results, let alone consequences, cannot yet be anticipated. They locate themselves

6 See David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1989). While Matthiessen tells a narrative in which his choice of authors and his reconstruction of the period suggest a beginning of American literature once and for all, others have told conflicting tales about those cultural narratives precisely ignored or even suppressed in Matthiessen's account. For an excellent overview, see Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease, *The American Renaissance reconsidered* (1985). Matthiessen's narrative of an American Renaissance was first challenged by Donald Pease in "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon" (1990). Benn's criticism of Matthiessen has since been variously complemented, most convincingly again by Pease in *National Identities, Post-Modern Artifacts, and Post-National Narratives* (1992) and in John Wood Sweet's *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (2003).

not after some kind of rebirth, not at the end of a trajectory where American literature has finally arrived at itself, but right in the middle of the emergence of this new (literary) aesthetics. Matthiessen's narrative of the first cultural flowering, "of the potentialities freed by the revolution" (Matthiessen 1968: xv) identifies a homogeneous group of writers sharing a joint concern – the celebration of a new and self-confident America that has finally fulfilled its promise –, but we can say today that this homogeneous culture posited by Matthiessen is indeed a mystification. But even if this has been repeatedly ousted as the simplistic reduction of a literary historian trying to provide the stable ground upon to establish the tradition or rather politics of a specifically 'American' literary history, it has nevertheless stuck with literary historians who find it difficult to accept that a text can be a haphazard or imperfectly provisional expression of the ambivalent promises of a time – in Emerson's words: not a "canvas of Time" but a "sketch" (*W*, I, 265). And indeed, Matthiessen and others, in their attempt to construct a "continuity" of American (literary) history, have conveniently ignored that the narrative of a brilliant makeover in Emerson's America also coincides with the "minor" narratives of Jackson's Indian removal or with that of the mistreatment of the black population both in the South and in the North.[7]

For Emerson and other authors of the era, the birth of a self-consciously American literature is still something that is left to be desired. It has not happened yet and it is only with the detached perspective of old age that Emerson will be able to look back upon the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century and say that "the ancient manners were giving way" (*W*, X, 325). The use of the progressive indicates, however, that when it happened, Emerson's "new consciousness" (*W*, X, 326) was not something that simply arrived on the scene. The revolution or renewal of American culture that Emerson witnesses is slow, as a paradoxical description of this process by Emerson in "The American Scholar" suggests: "This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture" (*W*, I, 107). If Emerson specifies the "revolution" as "gradual," then this also means that the revolution will come about not by a sudden reformation of American culture, but rather by a slow process of change or transition. In other words: If the process of "gradual domestication" is itself the "revolution," then Emerson frames a kind transitionality or liminality as the condition of the possibility of any cultural or individual change. This is why David Mikics has described both Emerson's notion of culture as well as that of the individual as "not-yet-achieved entities" (Mikics 2003: 1). They are to be reformed according to the same slow procedure that also underwrites what he elsewhere

7 The argument for a "continuity" of American literature was first made by Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961). For a history of the exclusions pertaining to the construction of the body politic in America's formative years, see Sweet's *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (2003).

terms "perfectionism": they cannot be reformed once and for all, they cannot simply be reborn (as the label of an American "renaissance" suggests), they must be changed and improved continually. The reason that Emerson nevertheless terms this "gradual domestication" a "revolution" is that because, as a philosopher of culture, he conceives of this wish to be perfected as both necessary and risky: in their compulsion to move on, both culture 'at large' as well as the individual immersed in it encounter a risk or "fate" that can threaten the possibility of change or improvement altogether.

Specificity and transition

Emerson's writing articulates this experience of being in transition. An experience that, while attributable to emergent forces, cannot yet be seen as a completed next step in the achievement of the American destiny or promise. Emerson's was a culture whose very identity then rested not so much upon a notion of "revolution" or a characteristically American "newness," as Irving Howe has it (Howe 1986), but rather upon concepts of change and transition. But for a culture as deeply invested in historic or, rather, historicist discourses as America's, for a culture obsessed with finding its 'specificity' and 'originality,' the formulation of such an experience of being in transition obviously poses a problem, since it challenges any claim for historical or cultural 'specificity.' Unfortunately, no attention has been drawn to this double problem of both Emerson's investigation of early nineteenth-century historicist discourse as well as of the problematic notion of historical specificity as implied by early America's attempts to define a representatively 'American' culture. I want to argue, however, that Emerson's use of a temporal terminology – of the "today," "the present," "the moment," "the contemporary," etc. – cannot be adequately understood without early America's recourse to and reception of historicist discourses at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[8]

Especially pertinent here is a historicism that American imports from Britain: the first decades of the nineteenth century brought an innovation of English and, especially, Scottish historicism in which a sense of crisis was all-pervading and which set itself the goal of ascertaining what its authors called the "spirit of the age." Such an attention to the "spirit of the age," as James Chandler has argued convincingly in *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism,* would also go to question the "naturalized familiarity" (1998: 37) with which we restore works to their historical situation. Drawing attention to the "spirit of the age," trying to read the "signs of the times" for these historically

8 For the classic treatments of the emergence of historicist thought in England and Germany, see Friedrich Meinecke's *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook* (1972) and R. G. Collingwood's *The Idea of* History (1993).

minded authors of the first half of the nineteenth century means, as Chandler has it, to "call our attention to the historical specificity of our ways of specifying historically" (1998: 48). In other words: What is at stake here is not the standard (new) historicist injunction to "always historicize" (Jameson 1981: 9), but rather a set of problems associated with the 'representativity' or 'specificity' of historical experience itself. If new historicist critiques have drawn attention to the specific historical circumstances (of writing and reading literature, of literary production and reception) then it is precisely that specificity, as I will argue with respect to Emerson, that becomes a major issue and problem of a self-consciously American literature. It goes without saying that this would also necessitate a rewriting of the story of American literature that is now firmly and safely in the hands of a new historicist criticism. It would require us to ask not so much how literary texts express a situation that is historically specific, but rather how this criterion of 'specificity' is a desideratum rather than a given in American literature and how we can talk precisely about those texts that are unable to specify any such specific "spirit of the time".

On the one hand, then, the American interest in history was often focused on discovering the specificity of the American historical situation and experience – as well as, of course, on how they were opposed to a specifically European history and experience. On the other hand, however, we find in at least some American writing of the first half of the nineteenth century a complex investigation of these discourses of historical specificity. And in Emerson's case, I want to maintain, we find the introduction of a self-consciously historicist culture that precisely refutes any such claim to specifying 'America' and its place in history in favour of a more sustained analysis of the process of historical change and transition. America's engagement with an inherited (British, Romantic) historicism can thus also be read as the discovery of a more complex problem of American self-reflection that realizes that its attempts to write the narrative of America's history always already must be considered 'generic' insofar as they themselves precisely produce the grounds upon which inevitably yet another American history is written.[9]

In America, just as in England, this "seek[ing] the means of making legible the historical peculiarity of their place and time," as Chandler argues, amounts to "a project of making history by making it legible" (1998: 78). For Chandler, the first few decades of the nineteenth century are therefore "the age of the spirit of the age" (1998: 196). This British Romantic historicism fell on especially fruitful grounds in America because Americans had a natural interests in the workings of history: If America was to be a nation and culture distinct from the English, then it

9 For an elaboration of this aspect of 'generativity' inherent to all processes of history, see Paul Veyne's *Writing history. Essay on epistemology* (1984: 59f.). For an account of the interaction between American nationalism and early republican literature, see Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic. Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (1990: 118-50)

would also need its own history. Furthermore, America's "millennial expectations," as Sacvan Bercovitch has pointed out in *The American Jeremiad* (1978: 42), required a special organization of history's temporality that bent the future back into the present, so that fulfilment and initiative was to be located not in a distant future but in the lived present (see Bercovitch 1978: esp. 31-92). In order to become a *manifest* destiny, the American promise had to show itself in the materialities of everyday, ordinary lives.[10]

Emerson's "American" historicism itself develops out of a confrontation with the writings of pre-eminent British historicists such as William Hazlitt, John Stuart Mill, and, especially, Thomas Carlyle. Emerson, as Chandler suggests, "delivered his lectures in England, after much consultation with his mentor Carlyle, and in respect to such paradoxes this discussion certainly bears the marks of writings by both Carlyle and Mill about heroes, hero worship, characteristics, spirits of the age, and signs of the times" (Chandler 1998: 176). Carlyle's influence and his extensive correspondence with Emerson are well-documented and Emerson would have been aware of other main exponents of the British historicist movement. But Emerson's aim is not merely a matter of "out-Carlyling Carlyle", as Edgar Allen Poe has suspected in a review of Emerson's essays in the *Graham Review* in January 1842 (see Poe 1902: XV, 260). He is not merely Carlyle's docile disciple, rather, he enters into a long exchange with the Scottish essayist and in his letters to Carlyle as well as in his essays exposes some of the problems of his historicism.[11]

Also, Emerson's *English Traits*, published in 1856, is an attempt at turning the tables on British historians. Here, a prominent American critic dares to say something about British culture. This turning of the tables, however, happens with a twist that is significant with regards to what I have been saying about the discourse of historical and cultural specificity. If the British discussion of 'America' turned around a possible definition of its "spirit of the age," and, therefore, around the question of the totality of its culture, then the return of this historicism to Britain via America comprises an important modification: Emerson speaks only of English *traits*, that is, of features, of fragments, of fleeting impressions. The title of the essay resonates with the term of the "sketch" that turns up repeatedly in historicist contexts in Emerson, and the traits indeed combine to give a sketch-like impression of England rather than the comprehensive totality of a historical narrative. The title of *English Traits* thus already foregrounds the problematics of historicism and its writing by promising to talk about a specific Culture – the English – while at the same time refusing precisely this historical specificity by providing only traits – implying both that what will be presented is characteristic

10 On the notion of „manifest destiny" and its relevance to the literature of New England Romanticism, see Kris Fresonke, *West of Emerson: The Design of Manifest Destiny* (2003: esp. 88-127).

11 On Emerson's life-long relation with Carlyle, se Kenneth Marc Harris, *Carlyle and Emerson: Their Long Debate* (1978).

of the English (as in "trait" of character), yet only sketch-like, hazy in its outline, etc. ("trait" as the stroke of a pen, touch of paint).

Even in his early attempts at a "Historical Discourse" (*W*, II, 27-86) for his hometown Concord, Emerson attempts not only to identify the 'specifiable' facts of life in a small New England town, he also draws attention to the precarious transitional moments of this community (the inhabitants first encounters with the native population, the slow waning of religious fervour) to present a picture that exposes everything that is makeshift, everything that cannot be accounted for in terms of a historical genealogy. Emerson's characterization of his age as transitional, viewed in this context, is then already a revision of a doctrine of cultural specificity because it finds the characteristic imprint of the epoch to be that no specific facts express the state of the nation. When Emerson's substitutes British historicism's "spirit of the age" with his own notion of a "present age," then this also indicates that he views historicism's obsession with specificity as problematic.

Emerson is not alone in characterizing his age as transitional. His call for a radical shift in the nature of literary attention towards the transitional moment of America's "present age" is echoed by a number of contemporary critics equally attempting to diagnose their contemporary moment and thus to prepare the ground for an assessment of America's future: From Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and its qualification of the "[t]he present state of American Affairs" (Paine 1976: especially 81-99), to Joseph Story's 1826 talk on the "Characteristics of the Age" (Story 1852), to Emerson's early attempt to inventarise the "Peculiarities of the present Age" (*J*, II, 164) in a long list in his journal in 1827, to Alexis de Tocqueville's diagnosis America's "present democratic age" in *Democracy in America* in 1835 (*DiA*, 827), to William Ellery Channing's famous 1841 address on "The Present Age" (Channing 1886: 164-171): an investigation or problematization of the specificity of America's historical situation, of its *Zeitgeist*, and an elaboration of the ambivalence of its cultural promise develops into the central preoccupation of American arts and letters in the first half of the nineteenth century.

As a consequence, the notion of a "present age" develops into a kind portmanteau term in a discussion in which not merely the nature of America's transitional moment but the very constitution of 'America' is at stake. The various treatises on the "present age" symptomatically express that Americans are deeply anxious about a culture that is rapidly turning away precisely from the Puritan values and ideals that were commonly assumed to have founded America. Furthermore, the transitional developments that Emerson and his contemporaries hold to be characteristic of their age, are precisely no longer readily assimilable to a Puritan doctrine of providence because their results and consequences cannot be estimated, cannot be calculated or integrated into the general organization of historical temporality that the doctrine of providence suggested. In other words, the transitional moment of the present precisely explodes the historical continuum

and exposes an ambivalence that can no longer be easily reconciled with the narratives that America tells itself about both its past (the myth of passage, the genealogy of the founding fathers) and its future (providence, millennialism). What is at stake, then, in the rampant renewal of America in a present whose consequences prove increasingly hard to predict, is the very nature of 'America' and its history.

Taking Emerson's ambivalent assessment of his times seriously consequently also functions as a sort of historical caveat, preventing a too hasty identification of the writer and his socio-cultural background. It opens the possibility to think of different 'Emersons,' each brought to coherence not by the cultural whole, but rather by particular but significant developments within that cultural whole. If I am going to talk in detail about certain historical developments in Emerson's time, this is then not meant to provide the kind of rock-bottom foundation for a new, more conclusive or comprehensive 'Emerson'. Rather, I would like to show that Emerson's ambivalent attitude towards his time develops both out of as well as against the ambivalent possibilities of his age. If Emerson's case shows that some of the developments could only be assessed in hindsight, then this strengthens my argument about both the ambivalence of the character 'Emerson' as well as about the ambivalence of a contemporary American moment that comprises conflicting destinies and cultural temporalities. Emerson, in an entry in his journal in 1827, identifies precisely these crosscurrents of his time when he talks of the "peculiarities of the present age" (*J*, III, 70). Later, in the essay "Circles," he argues that the age's undecidability produces the precarious experience of being on "the verge of to-day" (*W*, II, 315). Because such an experience cannot be expressed in the terms of the historicism that had come to express 'America,' it also necessitates a revolution of the symbolic forms and modes of expression that articulate 'America'.

Emerson, as a former member of the Unitarian ministry, would have been intimately aware of the theological implications of the jeremiad's model of history and how it governed the organization of time in American culture. In his essays, however, the jeremiad's suggestion of a specifically American organization of history is combined with an awareness of America's historical difference *here and now*, in the present. Emerson receives this historicist impulse via Carlyle who, in the first chapter of *Chartism,* ponders on the "The Condition-of-England Question" (Carlyle 1840: 1ff.), and who, in *Past and Present* (Carlyle 1896-99) as well as in the essay "The Signs of the Times" (Carlyle 1896–99), proposes his own 'theory' of England's "spirit of the age". How central a similiar attention to America's 'spirit of the age' is in Emerson's early writing can be gauged from the program of his early lecture courses, written and delivered in Boston between the publication of *Nature* (1836) and his second book *Essays, First Series* (1841). Maybe it is because these lectures contradict the standard image of Emerson as a "transcendentalist"

philosopher ignorant towards the historicist obsession of his contemporaries that these lectures have not received much attention. They are especially relevant, however, because they show Emerson to be deeply invested in the historicist discourses and epochal analyses of his time. We find here the early imprint of Emerson's elaboration and critique of contemporary historicist dogma that will, in less explicit terms, also form the basis of much of his later writing. The lectures courses on "The Philosophy of History" (*EL*, II, 1-188), on "The Present Age" (*EL*, III, 175-315), as well as on "The Times" (*EL*, III, 335-382) are especially pertinent to our concern here, because a young Emerson here evaluates and challenges his contemporaries' obsession with the past. In the introductory lecture to his course on "The Philosophy of History," the first lecture under Emerson's own management, he confesses his profound interest in the topic of history, only to argue, against contemporary historicist habits, that any discussion of history needs to give account also of that which is not commensurable to historicist discourses: For history's narrative to be "true" (*EL*, II, 9), he argues, it would have to be able to give account also of what he calls man's "wonderful thoughts" and "the contrast between his wishes and his position which constitutes the tragic element" (*EL*, II, 9). Already in these early lectures we can discern Emerson's attempt to conceive of the *other* of history and of the implied discourse of 'specificity,' namely history's potentiality, its "incalculable power" that is the result of "some faculty never yet unfolded" (*EL*, II, 9), its "idiosyncrasies," contradicting the "abstractions" of history (*EL*, II, 12). That is, Emerson values precisely that which is not "commensurate" with "actual history" (*EL*, II, 9). To expose this potential inherent in any kind of history but usually glossed over when we give an account of it, we must thus 'defamiliarize' our historical narratives precisely by looking at the antagonistic or, as Emerson phrases it, "tragic" potential of a present moment that comes as a rupture, as a stepping out of historical time: "The ancients are dead, but for us the earth is new today and heaven is raining influences. Let us unfetter ourselves of our historical associations" (*EL*, II, 11).

British historicism and the *case* of America

These early lectures can be read as a kind of blueprint for Emerson's historical thought. But they are written out of and against a culture that was already deeply invested in the problems of historicist discourses. For America to become an independent nation, it was necessary that America began its own age, an age that had to be historically different from the epoch of Europe and, therefore, an age that had to be *specified* historically. America's obsession with history is therefore both global and local. It concerns America's position in a general history of nations as well as more local aspects of American culture. Early on in the nineteenth

century, Americans founded numerous historical societies to collect and record the historical data of the New World (see Ross 1984). For Maine alone, to provide an example, the busy accumulation of historical data amounted to several book-length histories: John Sullivan's *History of the District of Maine* (1795), the two volumes of William Willis' *The history of Portland, from its first settlement: With notices of the neighbouring towns, and of the changes of government in Maine* (1831-1833), or Rufus King Sewall's *Ancient dominions of Maine* (1859).

This American obsession with history, however, is the result of a trans-atlantic translation or transferral of British Romantic Historicism to New England. In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, there had been a remarkable inflation of historical writing in Britain. Much of this writing concerns itself with the question of the *historical specificity* of a given culture. Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, as well as William Hazlitt: all worked under the assumption that the aim of writing history was not so much to give an account of the past but, rather, to combine the diverse facts of the present into a narrative that would allow for an assessment of *Zeitgeist*, of the historical specificity of what they variously called "The Spirit of the Age" or the "Signs of the Times".[12] They were interested in such a "spirit of the age" because they thought that it would announce a change that was to fundamentally change British Culture. Carlyle and Mill, who both had strong ties to the St. Simonian program, held that the progress of industrialization in England would enable a sweeping reform of British society, but without the political violence that had devastated France after the Revolution.[13] The basic tenet of their historicism was the assumption that change and progress could be contextualized within the specificity of a given culture. This obviously also called for a specification of the circumstances of the time and culture that made change happen. As a consequence, these authors need to deduce from the known facts a kind of representative imprint or historical situation: the "spirit of the age".

Emerson had read Carlyle's pieces on the "Spirit of the Age" in the *Edinburgh Review*, and it was with these pieces in mind that he decided, travelling in Italy on his trip through Europe in 1833, to spend the summer in England and to try to make Carlyle's acquaintance. Carlyle had never been particularly successful in England but had a steady readership in America. The same is true for Carlyle's version of historicism: it was not received well in England but obviously hit a nerve in America where Carlyle's writings earned him a steady income. Emerson's

12 See, for example, Thomas Carlyle's "Signs of the Times," (1829: 441-442), John Stuart Mill's "The Spirit of the Age," in Mill's *Essays on Literature and Society* (1965: 31), William Hazlitt's "contemporary portraits" in *The Spirit of the Age* (1935), as well as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's "The Intellectual Spirit of the Time," *England and the English* (1970: 286-7).

13 Significantly enough, the St. Simonians had themselves published a compendium on "Signs of the Times" in *L'Organisateur* in the early 1830s. See Richard Pankhurst's *The St. Simonians, Mill and Carlyle: A Preface to Modern Thought* (1957).

American editorship of Carlyle's writings later provided numerous occasions for correspondence, in which the topic of a "spirit of the age" turns up repeatedly.[14]

Carlyle himself was strongly influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment, especially by the writings of William Hamilton – who serves as a kind of leitmotiv in Carlyle's *Past and Present* –, as well as by those of Adam Smith and Walter Scott (see Jessop 1997). For Carlyle, and later for Emerson, the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment are a valuable source because the accelerated state of history in America to contemporary observers resembled the *Ungleichzeitigkeit* of Scotland's history *vis-à-vis* that of England.[15] With their "calibration of uneven temporalities" (Chandler 1998: 134) and their representation of layers of "archaic" cultural forms sedimented within the nation's modern historical geography, Walter Scott's historical novels, especially, proved fruitful because they provide a model for a representation of America's own diversity of origins and its culture of heterogeneity. Clearly, Scott's influence is also discernible elsewhere in American literature, for example in Cooper's historical novels or Hawthorne's romances. Also, we find in Carlyle's "heroes" and Emerson's "representative men" the kind of central figure that, like the narrator in Scott's novels, functions as the centre or focus of an epic historical crisis, attempting to fuse a diversity of facts and conflicting historical temporalities. More importantly however, and here we return to the theme of historical specificity, we may follow George Lukács who, in *The Historical Novel,* has credited Scott's novels with being the first to document the "specifically historical," defined as "the derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age" (Lukács 1963: 19). Emerson was well acquainted with Scott and the tradition of historical writing and historicist research that he acted as a patron to. In a short speech given at the Massachusetts Historical Society's celebration of the centennial Anniversary of Walter Scott's birth in 1871, he himself compiles a list of the exponents of this tradition: "Mackintosh, Horner, Jeffrey, Playfair, Dugald Stewart, Sydney Smith, Leslie, Sir William Hamilton, Wilson, Hogg, De Quincey" (*W*, XI, 467). Emerson's trans-atlantic import of a historicist problem within British Romanticism is relevant here because it explains his own historical interest in America's "spirit of the age" as well as a more particular fascination with America's historical anomaly within the history of the Western world.

Ronald Meek has argued, in a landmark essay on "The Scottish Contribution to Marxist Sociology" (Meek 1967), that the Scottish Historical School was a decisive influence on Marx's revision of historicist dogma and his conceptualization of a

14 I think that three letters of this exchange are especially relevant when it comes to this historicist them, all of them circle around the theme of a "Present Age": letters from Emerson to Carlyle from December 12, 1839 (*CEC*, 253-55) and from March 18, 1840 (*CEC*, 260-62), and a letter from Carlyle to Emerson from January 17, 1840 (*CEC*, 257-60).

15 On the similarities between the American and Scottish relation to Britain and on the crucial legacy that Scottish authors left to American literature, see Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (2000: esp. 176-215).

moment in the history of Western nations in which the smooth transition from one age to the next can no longer be taken for granted. Marx and Carlyle share this interest with other writers – with Goethe and Michelet, for example –, but it is Marx and, to a lesser degree, Carlyle who come up with theoretical descriptions of the complex period and process of transition, with conceptualizations of the epochal threshold as a revolutionary moment that is itself not reducible to the modalities of historical time. Hence, the increasing interest in a definition of the "contemporary" and of the "spirit of the age" as something that is ambivalent, comprising different cultural temporalities. Like in Marx's well-known example of "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (Marx 1996), the "contemporary" precisely does not show itself as a mere presence, it is both an inheritance of forms (language, customs, social hierarchies, etc.) as well as the potential for something new (the new epoch, the language of revolution, etc). As Marx points out:

> "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they appear to be revolutionising themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that is when they nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honoured guise and with this borrowed language." (Marx 1996: 32)

Marx's dictum that human beings make their own history but under conditions given them from the past thus also identifies a paradox at the heart of the then predominant historicist dogma of 'specificity': history is made precisely in those moments in which it is impossible to say what, specifically, the "spirit of the age" is. But such a rupture of the continuum of history is necessary, if "something unprecedented" (the new age, the new culture, etc.) is to be created. Marx thus proposes a heightened attention to precisely those urgent moments in the present moment of culture that cannot be reclaimed within a historical narrative.[16]

While a new historicisim was a decisive influence on the constitution of a specifically American vision of history, this exchange also runs the other way, since European historians and cultural critics were increasingly puzzled by the problem of how to judge American manners. American manners, in the early nineteenth century, become *the* case for British historicist thought. Again, the questions of historical specificity plays a certain role here, because European historians were uncertain whether American manners were in any way

16 In order to come to terms with the paradoxical potential of an eventful moment of the present, critical thinkers of the time attempt to develop a new theoretical language. Marx, for example, revises the historicist discourse of the Scottish Historical School so as to also integrate new theories of economic growth and of the liberal market, because for him it is the market that is responsible for this new kind of complex or contradictory temporality (see Meek 1967).

'representative' of a specific or particular culture, that is, a culture that had left behind its English origins to become 'American'. Furthermore, historians were uncertain about whether America's *case* did not pose a more fundamental methodological problem for historicism. This involved all shades and tones of English Anti-American sentiments, but it offered historicists an occasion to test their theories against the cultural specificity of the American historical "situation" in "cases" (manners, character, etc.). As Chandler argues: "For English writers of the post-Waterloo period, American manners had become a case, in short, a circumstantial challenge to a normative frame of reference" (Chandler 1998: 445). The emergence in England of a specific understanding of 'American' culture is thus precisely also the site of the appearance of a new British historicism concerned with the specificity of the historical "situation," with the question of "climate" and "mentality".[17] Significantly enough, "America helped shape a concept of culture in which Britons could re-imagine their own culture in its historicity" (Chandler 1998: 447). Britain's meticulous ethnography of the early American republic and its peculiar manners thus also served, far from being uninterested, to inversely add to the specificity of the historian's description of Britain itself. As Chandler points out:

> "[T]hese surveys of "American manners" need to be read as cutting both ways – that is, as carrying implication for both cultural identities at a crucial moment in their modern development and, further, an implication for the development of ethnographic practice. The case of post-Constitution America – U.S. culture – is crucial to understanding the "historical situation" of British Romanticism both in form and fact." (Chandler 1998: 448)

Obviously, the animosity between America and Britain also developed alongside America's rise as a market economy, and America's anxiousness to define itself as a national culture resonated with growing concerns about a decline of British national identity on the other side of the Atlantic. Washington Irving, in his 1819 *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* (Irving 1978), is one of the first to frame this animosity between Britain and America as a matter also of (national) literature, when he argues in "English Writers on America":

> "It is with feelings of deep regret that I observe the literary animosity daily growing up between England and America. Great curiosity has been awakened of late with respect to the United States, and the London press has teemed with volumes of travels through

17 There is a great deal of excellent literature on the influence of British Romanticism on American literature and on how American culture carried what is now commonly named, following Robert Weisbuch, "the Burden of Britain". But presentations of this exchange commonly run in one direction only and do not concern themselves with how America itself became the constitutive *case* for an emerging British Historicism. Clearly enough, in England, this obsession with America also had internal reasons. After all, the British public and the authorities were growing anxious over the increasing middle-class emigration from what the émigrés thought to be a politically corrupt country. As it became obvious that English reform movements both from "below" as well as from "above" were not going to be successful, America served as a kind of outlet that made it possible to divert attention from increasing social conflicts in Britain itself. On "The Burden of Britain and the American Writer," see Robert Weisbuch's *Atlantic Double-Cross. American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (1986: 3-35). For an account of how Emerson adopts the question of historical "climate" and turns it into a principle of his poetics, see Eduardo Cadava's study on *Emerson and the Climates of History* (1997).

> the Republic; but they seem intended to diffuse error rather than knowledge; and so successful have they been, that, notwithstanding the constant intercourse between the nations, there is no people concerning whom the great mass of the British public have less pure information, or entertain more numerous prejudices." (Irving 1978: 43)

England's historicist curiosity for America in the eyes of American writers thus accentuates the need for an American self-description or self-definition, for a 'natively' American literature expressing the specificity of America's contemporary situation.[18] But this self-description itself has to take recourse to 'foreign" models of historicizing, the issue of defining a specifically American culture can therefore not be distinguished from that of the problem of 'representative words'. In other words: the specificity of American culture must be expressed in 'representatively' American *words* and, therefore, the historicist problem of specifying America is tantamount to a problem of rhetorics, of literature, or of poetics. In Irving's presentation of this "irksome and hackneyed topic" (Irving 1978: 45), the historicist perspective is therefore replaced by an awareness of a linguistic or rhetorical dilemma, by what he calls "the tissue of misrepresentation":

> "The tissue of misrepresentations attempted to be woven round us are like cobwebs woven round the limbs of an infant giant. Our country continually outgrows them. One falsehood after another falls off of itself. We have but to live on, and every day we live a whole volume of refutation. All the writers of England united, if we could for a moment suppose their great minds stooping to so unworthy a combination, could not conceal our rapidly-growing importance, and matchless prosperity. They could not conceal that these are owing, not merely to physical and local, but also to moral causes – to the political liberty, the general diffusion of knowledge, the prevalence of sound moral and religious principles, which give force and sustained energy to the character of a people; and which, in fact, have been the acknowledged and wonderful supporters of their own national power and glory." (1978: 45)

But again: Irving's *Sketches* are intended for a European audience and the very definition of American cultural indepedence is therefore voiced in the terms of an emerging *British* historicism, as a matter of "moral causes" and "character" rather than in terms of resources.

While the American desire to define a specific national culture is dependant upon a British influence, for the British, the rapid "Americanization" of America serves as a case study that corroborates the truth of the dogma of "historical

18 In America, the question of historical specificity was not only tantamount to a successful definition of America's status as a nation, it was also of central importance to the constitution of the early republic since it came to bear on questions of political organization. Charles Ingersoll, for example, in an influential address to the American Philosophical Society in 1823 (later published as *Discourse Concerning the Influence of America on the Mind*) asks whether America's new political institutions would also produce new forms of citizenship, new manners, or new mentalities (Ingersoll 1823). In a way that had then become fashionable, Ingersoll attempts to explain how character results out of the institutions of private and public life. Descriptions of America's specificity were consequently also attempts at outlining or defining the American political subject. Emerson partially absorbs this argument, especially when he tries to explain the American spirit with recourse to the institutions of ordinary American life.

situation" and "specificity".[19] Henry Bradshaw Fearon with his *Sketches of America. Narrative of a Journey of Five Thousand Miles Through the Eastern and Western States of America*, William Cobbett with his *Journal of a Year's Residence in the United States*, Morris Birkbeck with his 1817 *Notes on a Journey in America from the Coast of Virginia to the Territory of Illinois* as well as with his *Letters from Illinois* in 1818: these writers put a new British historicism to the test by applying it to the case of 'America,' while at the same time contributing to what Irving calls the "tissue of misrepresentations" that many Americans felt was imposed on them from the outside. American publications, however, were indeed similar, equally invested in specifying America's historical situation in what many still saw as a fantastic, almost otherworldly continent. John Mason Peck's *A Gazetteer from Illinois* (1838), John Bristed's *America and Her Resources* (1818), Meriwether Lewis' and William Clarks' *History of the Expedition* (1814) – accounts of the peculiar character of the American landscape with its vast plains, strange canyons and gargantuan mountain ranges, collected during their expeditions from 1804 to 1806 –, or John Bartram's collection on the marvellous beauty of the American flora in his *Observations*: Just as their British counterparts, these writers, in attempting to inventarise American nature and life, take recourse to a historical discourse that is meant to specify America's "spirit of the age" in the contemporary moment. While the American desire for self-understanding is consequently awakened by a feeling of being defined by the outside, American self-definitions are themselves based on or constituted by templates that American authors adopt from an outside perspective. In other words: America's attempts at specifying what is 'proper' only to their own culture is derived precisely from an external perspective, the expression of a 'natively' American culture is therefore paradoxically also the result of a complex trans-atlantic exchange.

The conundrum of America's "present age"

While I have limited my narrative of this trans-atlantic exchange to an exchange between British and American cultural concerns, the case of 'America' was also widely received as a historicist or cultural problem in continental literature and philosophy. And there is one French commentator among these observers of America that will play an important role in my analysis of Emerson's writing: Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville 2004) is interesting in our context because it similarly attempts to catalogue the cultural, political, and historical specificities of 'America'. What is more important, however, is that Tocqueville carefully observes an element in American life, in America's

19 On the discourse of "Americanization" and how it influenced early literary development, see Göran Blix's "Charting the 'Transitional Period': The Emergence of Modern Time in the Nineteenth Century" (2006).

situation in the present, that precisely goes beyond a notion of historical specificity. Sent on a trip across the United States together with Gustave de Beaumont to study the American penitentiary system – published in 1832 as *Du système pénitentiaire aux Etats-Unis et de son application* (Tocqueville 1979) –, Tocqueville collects what he thinks are representatively American ways and *moeurs américaines,* and he hopes that these impressions will provide a comprehensive picture of America's departure from Europe. Tocqueville applies the kind of historicist writing that he had learned in a lecture course given by François Guizot's at the Sorbonne. Guizot's course, later to be published as the *General History of Civilization in Europe* (Guizot 1997)*,* serves as a preparation for his official journey to the United States, but there is a qualitiy of American life that Tocqueville discovers that cannot quite be made to conform with the kind of historicist discourse that he had learned. He finds, in America, an anomaly, an irritation to that discourse that he will grow increasingly concerned about: interspersed with Tocqueville's description of scenes of American life, we find rather anxious remarks about a specifically American unrest, that Tocqueville cannot quite get a fix on. Also, his qualification of American manners is frequently interrupted by comments on the unpredictability or even inconsistency of the democratic sentiment and mentality in America. At the heart of Tocqueville's depiction of a 'specifically' American culture, we thus find a quality that he cannot quite pinpoint, an anomaly in America's present situation that seems to be a reminder of the ambivalent promise of democracy as well as of the uncertain future of the American project in general.[20]

Tocqueville is thus the first to locate, above and beyond any historical specificity, the contradictory potential of an American present that cannot yet be made commensurate with a historical narrative.[21] The following two passages illustrate this Tocquevillean vacillation between a discourse of historical specificity and his discovery of the ambivalence of a present moment. Significantly, Tocqueville uses the metaphor of the stream or river for both conflicting models of historical progress:

> "It is clear to anyone who pays attention that in every century there is one singular, dominant fact to which all other facts are related. This fact almost always gives rise to a fundamental thought or principal passion that ultimately attracts all other feelings and ideas to itself and carries them along, as a great river seems to absorb its tributaries." (*DiA*, 582)

And:

20 Following Elisabeth Bronfen, I take the term "American project" to suggest precisely such a simultaneity of a the cultural modalities of the (imminent) "promise" and that of the (potential) "catastrophe", see Elisabeth Bronfen, "Der 'American Dream': Versprechen und Katastrophe eines Begriffs" (2007).

21 Probably it is no coincidence that it should be a French philosopher of history that comes up with the first formulation of the urgency or the danger of history in America. After all, the failure of the revolution and the tiresome process of rebuilding constitutional authority under Louis Philippe made French historians particularly susceptible to the contingencies implied by the process of history.

> "A world that is totally new demands a new political science. To this need, however, we have given little thought. Immersed in a rapidly flowing stream, we stubbornly fix our eyes on the few pieces of debris still visible on the shore, while the current carries us away and propels us backward into the abyss." (*DiA*, 7)

The first passage, taken from the second book of *Democracy in America,* highlights standard historicist procedure by virtue of which "some peculiar and preponderating fact" is taken to provide the key to an epoch. Once the historian has identified this fact, he is able to produce a comprehensive picture of the age, because, like a "great river", it functions as a universal historical narrative that attracts all minor or particular stories. Tocqueville applies this procedure particularly in those passages in which he recounts the pre-constitutional formation of American democracy, where he argues that the conditions of colonial settlements seamlessly or quasi automatically unfolded into the forms of "communal liberty" that later became the basis of American democracy (see Maletz 1998). The second paragraph, however, taken from the introduction, frames a more precarious concern: here, Tocqueville imagines a moment of historical transition, the urgency implied by a moment of epochal change, in which the old is left behind but, thrown into the event of an unpredictable and tumultuous change, the new has not yet been attained. *Democracy in America* frequently returns to this scene, to this zone of indeterminacy, and to what Tocqueville thinks is, essentially, the precariousness of American politics. At the heart of the American project, Tocqueville locates a creative but risky time of transformation that cuts across the known grammars of historical progress and gives rise to transitional moments that do not allow for an anticipation or calculation of America's future. Tocqueville's ulterior motive in *Democracy in America* is obviously to explain and conceptualize the volatile political situation after the revolution in France, but his attempt to conceptualize "France's transition from a feudal monarchy to a democracy" (Pease 1999: 98) happens with recourse to an America that he describes as the paradoxical historical example of such a transitional period.[22] In yet another instance of a trans-atlantic exchange, then, we have here the case of Europe trying to conceive of its own transition in the terms of and with the example of 'America'. But more than in British historicist writing, America here becomes the scene of a different kind of historicism, of something that resists its easy integration within the contemporary historical paradigm. It suggests the possibility of a radical change and that history, for that matter, could proceed *otherwise*.

22 For an account of the development of the notion of the "transitional period" in French Romantic writing see (see Blix 2006). Tocqueville is not the only one trying to assess his country's transitional state by looking at America. This is how Tocqueville's contemporary Alfred de Musset expresses the conundrum in *The Confession of a Child of the Century* in 1836: "The whole sickness of the present century stems from two causes: everything that was is no more; and everything that will be is not yet. … Behind them lay a past for ever destroyed, still writhing on its ruins, along with all the fossils of the centuries of absolutism; before them lay the dawn of an unbounded horizon, the first lights of the future; and between these two worlds … something resembling the Ocean that separates the old continent from youthful America." (Musset 1973: 48-49)

Reading 'America' as a kind of historical 'Romanticism' transcending the strict template of cause and effect usually associated with the historical procedure, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* qualifies America's present age as an unstable, even "violent" "transitory state" (*DiA*, 459) that does precisely not allow for an estimation of its future. Rather, as Tocqueville argues, in America, the future does have "no harbinger, no premonitory sign":

> "If republican principles are to perish in America, they will succumb only after a long, frequently interrupted, repeatedly renewed period of social travail. They will more than once seem to be reborn, and will disappear forever only when an entirely new people has taken the place of the one that exists right now. [...] Such a revolution can have no harbinger, no premonitory sign. What strikes you most upon arriving in the United States is the tumultuousness of the political society. The laws change constantly, and at first sight it seems impossible that a people so uncertain of its wishes would not soon decide to replace its present form of government with an entirely new one. (*DiA*, 459)

But paradoxically, as Tocqueville acknowledges, it is precisely the fact that American democracy is not yet fully developed, that it is still "uncertain of its wishes," that provides it with its specific political ethos. He realizes, that it is precisely this "tumultuous" or undecidable state of American culture in the present, that may open a potential for a future politics, a potential, I take Tocqueville to imply, that is absent from the political landscape of Europe. 'America' thus comes to stand also for a different historical paradigm in which the homogenizing or universalizing tendencies of the discourse of historical specificity are replaced with a notion of historical flux or transition. And for some European philosophers and historians, 'America' is the place where history can take place in a *different* manner. In Tocqueville, the appearance of such a historical *other* irreducible to history and the discourses that regiment it is taxed with a characteristic kind of anxiety. For Emerson, as we will see, it is the condition of the possibility of a different American future and thus, the condition of the possibility of America's democracy, of its 'freedom,' etc.

Tocqueville's account of America's "transitory state" does, however, precisely not imagine an American 'exceptionalism'. Rather, it considers America's state as *eccentric* with regards *to itself*. Tocqueville's qualification of America as a nation in transition should thus not be read as necessarily expressing that "end of history" that Alexandre Kojève envisioned in 1948 when he stated in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* that "the North American extensions of Europe" were the dominion where "the end of History was not yet to come, but was already present, here and now" (Kojève 1980: 160).[23] Rather, America turns European notions of history inside out, criticizes them not from the perspective of some supposed end of history, but from within by exposing, critically, what had always

23 For a comprehensive overview on criticism on America that invokes the topos of an "end of history," see Joseph G. Kronick's formidable *American Poetics of History. From Emerson to the Moderns* (1984).

already been a part of it even if it had not been visible. As a consequence, I will be less interested in the notion of an American "exceptionalism" – in the sense of a nation exempted from the perils of history or historicity altogether – but rather, in Emerson's description and poetic implementation of an America that understands its history as being eccentric, that is, non-congruent or 'uncontemporaneous' with other nations but also, I want to insist, with itself.[24] This will also go to show that the Transcendentalist movement, considered to be entirely indisposed towards historical interests by Matthiessen's classic study on the *American Renaissance* (Matthiessen 1968), is very much a movement that gains its momentum in precisely the historicist debates that I have outlined above. But, it "transcends" these not to simply leave history by positing an "end of history," but by revising historicist dogma and attracting attention to its discontent, by exposing the inherent paradoxes of historicist discourse.

A "multitude of affinities"

In what follows, I will argue that in the American context it is Emerson who most fully investigates the implications of a discourse of historical specificity. More decidedly than Tocqueville, where the acknowledgement of a paradoxical moment of historical flux is an anxious one, Emerson is prepared to receive the full weight of this complication of historical epistemology and tries to conceptually come to terms with such an added calculus of chaos, with something I want to call, following Étienne Balibar, the ungoverned or unregulated "vacillation" inherent in the process of history (Kojève 1980: 160; Balibar 1988). For Emerson, this vacillation is the very condition of the possibility of historical change and, thus, the very condition of the possibility of 'America'. Other than continental historicists who attempt to integrate the particular histories of particular nations or societies within the larger order of a supposed world history, the notion of 'America,' as it is developed in Emerson's essays, is made possible only by an exposure to precisely such a "gulf" (*W*, I, 208), an "abyss" (*W*, II, 305), a "verge" (*W*, II, 315), or a "crack" (*W*, X, 325) itself not readily integrable in a historical narrative.

In Emerson's time, the most influential version of a traditional vision of historical progress as a succession of stages was the one that had been elaborated by Hegel. In Hegel's developmental model of *Weltgeschichte*, in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (*TWA,* XII), a fixed series of historical "stages" progress from the public freedom of the polis and the citizenship of the Roman Republic to the 'individualized' freedom of the Protestant Reformation and further to the civic freedom of the modern nation state. In his course on "The Philosophy of History"

24 For an overview of the history and ideology of "American exceptionalism" see Deborah Madsen's excellent *American Exceptionalism* (1998).

(1836-37), as well as in the later course on "The Present Age" (1839-40), Emerson notably revises the Hegelian paradigm by describing America's state as that of a present moment not yet made commensurate with the periodisation suggested by the notion of a *Weltgeschichte*. America is thus to be historically located, Emerson argues, in an ambivalent "present age" (*W*, I, 269), its temporality with respect to a supposed *Weltgeschichte* is uneven or eccentric because the integration of its national development and a more general pattern of the history of nations will not 'calculate' its historical status. Inherent in this present, in this "manifold world" (W, II, 4) of the "present day" (W, II, 22), is the exuberant ambivalence of the contemporary that for Emerson is an unwritten promise (of change, of freedom, etc.). If we are willing to acknowledge this promise, Emerson argues, then it may challenge any given state of society within a given historical situation of the world, because it lets us envision other possible courses of history. Continental historicism's tendency towards periodisation is consequently thwarted here by a strong focus on that which cannot be represented in the *dialectical* interaction of particular nations and historical periods: namely the moment of a "present hour" (*W*, I, 162) yet unmediated by the historical paradigm and a "present age" that is still a "mountainous miscellany" (*W*, IV, 289) not sorted out by history's universalizing tendency.

This also goes to explain why Emerson's "representative men" – other than Hegel's "welthistorische Individuen" (see *TWA*, XII, 45) – are 'representative' precisely not by conforming but by going beyond the historical matrix of their time. Tough they clearly belong and come out of an age or an epoch, they imagine cultural possibilities whose veracity cannot be asserted with regards to the present state of culture. Their 'representativity' thus lies precisely in drawing attention to a historical potential that has not yet been actualized. In their writing, Emerson's heterogeneous group of "representative men" give form to the experience of an eventful present not yet absorbed into a historical narrative and so expose an ambivalent potential inherent in the moment of the present. Emerson's redefinition of what it means to be "representative" thus concerns not the material of a culture, not the present state of a culture: his "representative men" are representative because they attempt to think the contingency involved in any historical process. As literary figures, they accumulate the unrelated particulars that go into the present moment. And by fictionalizing or imagining their potential relation, they also make those historical alternatives possible that, if actualized, they will representatively stand for. Emerson's representative men are consequently oxymorons, just as for him the thinking of history must necessarily be oxymoronic and contradictory, that is, both part and parcel of history as well as going beyond it. As he remarks in "Fate": "We are sure that, though we know not how, necessity does comport with liberty, the individual with the world, my

polarity with the spirit of the times" (*W*, VI, 4). How these relations operate, we can only imagine.

This oxymoronic vision of history that locates operative contradictions as providing the potential for historical change, may be distinct from Hegel's roughly contemporary formulation of historicism. But the Hegelian vision of history certainly shares with this historicism the preoccupation that cultures or nations need to give account of their history in order to become historical. In Hegel's new historiography, elaborated in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, he argues that every modern nation is confronted with an entirely unprecedented situation that it can only understand itself, in its own terms (*TWA*, XII, 11-141). Both For Hegel as well as later for Marx and Engels, the "great man" (Hegel) and the "spirit of the people" (Engels) thus function as "the 'spirit of the age' realizing itself," as Balibar suggests (1988: 193). For Emerson, however, this experience of history as something that is in the making does not merely apply to the "great man" that Hegel imagines. It is necessarily true for all: every man, Emerson argues, is yet "another history that goes daily forward" (*W*, II, 35), so that he himself is a "compend of time" or the "correlative of nature" (*W*, II, 35-36). And "[h]is power consists," as Emerson points out, "in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being" (*W*, II, 36). Individual history and that of the nation have in common that they are irreducible to just one or a limited number of causes. As a "multitude of affinities" or relations, they outrun the historical grammar of cause and effect. They are to be thought of, as Emerson points out, as "a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world" (W, II, 36). In other words: there is necessarily a minimal but unbridgeable distance between the causes of historical change and its realization in history. This is also why the contemporary world cannot be inventarized, its "spirit" cannot be abstracted into a historical fable because it yet realizes itself only by a "wild freedom" and by an "unceasing succession of brisk shocks of surprise" (*W*, II, 34). But Emerson points out that these "wonderful events and experiences" (W, II, 39) are irreducibly also part and parcel of historical experience, even if its result (history, the epochal turn, etc.) is more than the sum of the elements that went into its making. As a consequence, Emerson in "History" also argues for a shift in the historians' attention:

> "I am ashamed to see what a shallow village tale our so-called History is. How many times we must say Rome, and Paris, and Constantinople! What does Rome know of rat and lizard? What are Olympiads and Consulates to these neighboring systems of being? Nay, what food or experience or succor have they for the Esquimaux seal-hunter, for the Kanàka in his canoe, for the fisherman, the stevedore, the porter? Broader and deeper we must write our annals,—from an ethical reformation, from an influx of the ever new, ever sanative conscience,—if we would trulier express our central and wide-related nature, instead of this old chronology of selfishness and pride to which we have too long lent our eyes. Already that day exists for us, shines in on us at unawares, but the path of science and of letters is not the way into nature. The idiot, the Indian, the child

> and unschooled farmer's boy stand nearer to the light by which nature is to be read, than the dissector or the antiquary." (*W*, II, 40-41)

Emerson's calls for "broader and deeper annals" suggests that we must precisely look at the kind of ambivalent experience of the ordinary, of the contemporary – resulting from the past, but potentially bringing about a qualitatively different future – that has not yet been assimilated into a historical narrative. It goes without saying that this for Emerson also means that historians change the ways in which they write history. Instead of relating causes and effects, instead of assessing facts, *instead of applying a dialectics*, they need to look at the ambivalence of our ordinary, everyday experience, at how, as he phrases it, "that day […] shines in on us unawares". Only such an attention to the unregimented event of the contemporary moment will expose a contingent potential in history that prevents us from anticipating its next step.

Emerson's revision of historicist discourse under the sign of a paradoxical experience of a present or contemporary temporality could thus be framed in terms of what Althusser has conceptualized as "overdetermination". Although the term is now generally used in the sense of a general antinomy – as suggested by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (Jameson 1981: 146) –, Althusser originally deploys the term to talk about the workings and resolutions of contradiction in Hegelian and Marxist conceptions of history and periodisation:

> "If, as in this situation, a vast accumulation of 'contradictions' comes into play *in the same court,* some of which are radically heterogeneous – of different origins, different sense, different levels and points of application – but which nevertheless 'merge' into a ruptural unity, we can no longer talk of the sole, unique power of the general 'contradiction' Of course, the basic contradiction [between the forces and relations of production] dominating the period (when the revolution is the "task of the day") is active in all these "contradictions": and even in their fusion. But, strictly speaking, it cannot be claimed that these contradictions and their fusion are merely the pure phenomena of the general contradiction. The "circumstances" and "currents" which achieve it are more than its phenomena pure and simple. […] This means that if the 'differences' that constitute each of the instances in play (manifested in the 'accumulation' discussed by Lenin) 'merge' into a real unity, they are not 'dissipated' as pure phenomena in the internal unity of simple contradiction. The unity they constitute in this 'fusion' into a revolutionary rupture is constituted by their own essence and effectivity, by what they are, and according to the specific modalities of their action. In constituting this unity, they reconstitute and complete their basic animating unity, but at the same time they also bring out its nature: the 'contradiction' is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence, and even from the instances it governs; it is radically affected by them, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates; it might be called over-determined in its principle." (Althusser 1996: 102)

Althusser's significant revision of the conditions of revolution is relevant to our concerns here because it refutes any claims as to the *specificity* of the historical situation under which the revolution can occur. In other words: Althusser argues that when revolution is "the task of the day," it may be impossible to specify the individual instances, motives, etc. out of which this taks is generated. On the contrary, it is precisely that which refuses to be harmonized into a totalized

account of the historical situation (the "contradiction" of "differences," the "circumstances" and "currents") that creates a potential for change that is more than the sum of its (historically specifiable) parts. After the vanishing moment of historical change (the revolution) has occurred, however, this vacillation or ambivalence inherent in all historical processes is glossed over, it becomes invisible because it necessarily needs to be incorporated into a (historical) narrative of cause and effect that gives the present its 'proper' place. This ahistorical ambivalence is thus constitutive of history itself, but it is "repressed," as Balibar argues (Balibar 1994: 152), precisely in the moment in which a new historical situation is constituted or specified in a historical narrative.

Consequently, historicist discourses are only able to describe what has been institutionalized, or 'specified' as a completed stage or history, they cannot account for "affinities," that is, for the emergent forces and transitory phenomena that necessarily reappear when, as Emerson phrases it in his "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," "at times the resistance" between "the party of the Past and the party of the Future; the Establishment and the Movement" is "reanimated" so that the "schism [that] runs under the world" (*W*, X, 325) reappears. This schism is the very condition of historical change, but it only comes to the surface in the urgency of a moment of historical decision. The "reanimiation" of the ambivalence that goes before any historical constitution does precisely not *figure* in historicist discourse, it only "appears," as Emerson argues, "in Literature, Philosophy, Church, State and social customs" (*W*, X, 325). Against a contemporary obsession with documenting historical specificity, Emerson's interest consequently focuses on everything that does not yet amount to a history or ideology of 'America'.

While Emerson argues in the introduction to *Nature* that the "age is retrospective" (*W*, I, 3), he believes at the same time that its promise is essentially prospective, because the present's "wild freedom" (*W*, II, 34) comes as a challenge to the prevailing notion of a unified, commonsensical "spirit of the age". His estimate of the age thus sees its "spirit" not in a representative atmosphere or mood but, rather, in a contradiction of sentiments. Much like William Hazlitt, who already in 1819 had attempted to conceive of the "spirit of the age" as a "spirit of contradiction" (Hazlitt 1931: VII, 14), Emerson aims to make visible those contradictions, those conflicting parties and institutions that are not yet harmonized within a singularized "spirit" of the age. To Emerson, it is precisely such a contradiction (of sentiments, of moods, of opinions, of temporalities, etc.) that may let us conceive of alternative histories.

But Emerson's argument is not one of ahistoricism or anachronism. Although his procedure investigates the limits of historicism, it is interested in the sites where historicism interacts with complex American myths of passage, of revelation, of conversion and transition. If I have argued that the historical and cultural construction of America is heavily dependant upon the emergence of certain forms

of historicism in British Romanticism, then America's historical self-description as imagined by Emerson must be understood as a departure from the tenets precisely of this historicism. But it imagines America not as a nation outside of history, not as a site of anachronism, but rather, as history's *other*: as a nation that is built precisely on a complex renegotiation of historical problems and as a site that constantly needs to assert its own eccentricity with regards to its history. Emerson's America consequently stands for some of the paradoxes that abide in the notion both of "history" as well as of 'America,' *while still being a historical mode*.[25]

This recurrence of 'America' back upon itself points towards a capricious turbulence in the conceptualization of time, itself a central concept in the construction of America. It has become the standard view in theories of time that a homogeneous, linear sense of time was an achievement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. As Reinhart Koselleck has argued, this discovery of time's steady and linear progress – contingent upon the development of a number of social and technical innovations – led to a temporalisation of all experience (see Koselleck 2000, 1989). But theorists of time upheld the distinction between the routinely shaped time of everyday practice and the more difficult times of historicizing. Emerson notes, however, that even at the most basic level, when it comes to ordinary life, time is a complex phenomenon. Although we need to necessarily take our *contemporaneity* for granted, although necessarily the "day shines in on us unawares" (W, II, 40), he insists that the present moment is characterized by a complex configuration of *con-temporaneity,* that is, by an amalgamation of different cultural temporalities that we cannot reduce to the suggestion of one shared cultural or historical project. "[M]en […] cannot answer by a superior wisdom these facts or questions of time," Emerson insists in "History". In the last instance, there is always something – an "antagonist power" (*W*, II, 36), a moment of "conversion" (*W*, I, 115) or a vanishing "moment of germination" (*W*, VII, 38)– that resists its integration into time. Therefore, Emerson's present is not a present *once and for all*. Rather, his present is a singular event, it has to be repeated all over again. To insist on the self-presence of the "to-day" would bring about its essentialisation so that it would become an ideological fetish, unable to instigate new movement. This, I believe, is why Emerson's revision of historicist thought keeps a strong sense of that which is temporally indeterminate, of that which cannot be framed in terms of a representative "spirit of the age": the transitory, the spontaneous, the eventful.

25 For a summary and critique of this commonplace of "ahistoricism" in critical work on American literature, see Carolyn Porter's "American Ahistoricism," in *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner* (Porter 1981).

The future, present today?

Emerson, in his elaboration of the peculiar temporality of the "present age," does not merely address the questions implied by contemporary historicist usages. At times, his diagnosis also turns to the concrete forces of America's development in the present moment. In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, America goes through a rampant makeover.[26] Emerson's year of birth, 1803, marks the advent of the era of America's grand and, considering the vast stretches of land yet unpopulated, almost limitless expansion: Thomas Jefferson, for the total amount of fifteen million dollars, buys Louisiana which is subsequently subdivided into 14 states. Under its seventh president, Andrew Jackson, America lives through a time of relative peace as the formerly agrarian republic rapidly changes into an industrialized powerhouse. Following the completion of the Erie Canal, henceforth serving as the backbone for settlement and trade in the west, American trade is bustling and grows at fabulous rates.[27] U.S. population, at a meagre nine million at around 1820, will have tripled by 1850. Soon, however, many Americans grow anxious about America's furious makeover, fearing that the pastoral peacefulness of the American landscape that had previously suggested the equality of the people inhabiting this landscape was to give way before the onslaught of commerce and machinery. As Carolyn Porter points out,

> "protests about the ill effects of the factory system, the declining status and waning autonomy of farmers and mechanics, the wage earner's impotence to halt the growing disparity between wages and prices – all effects of an expanding market economy which served the interests of the rising men of the period – persisted." (Porter 1981: 23)

The incorporation of the machine into the garden, to paraphrase the title of Leo Marx's classic study (Marx 2000), in a coutry "poised on the verge of the most accelerated capitalist development in history" (Porter 1981: xiv), for some was merely a matter of "internal improvement".[28] Others, however, suspected that the evolving factory system, far from complementing the revolution, would betray its

26 On the fundamental change that America went through in the 30s, 40s and 50s of the 19th Century, see the chapter "Emerson's America" in Carolyn Porter's *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, Faulkner* (1981: 57-90) as well as the chapters "The Jacksonian Impulse" and "The Dynamics of Growth" in George Brown Tindall's and David E. Shi's *America: A Narrative History* (2004).

27 As William Charvat points out in *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870* (1992), the great land boom that started with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 coincides with America's first great literary boom. Just as the infant industries developed and grew, so did the profession of authorship. The collapse of the land boom in 1837 was also a significant turning point in the career of many American writers. On the spirit of improvement in the Jacksonian era, see Feller's *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840* (1995: esp. 14ff.).

28 A phrase originally coined by Daniel Webster but later adopted by the advocates of liberalism to describe the advantages of America's market economy. See especially Webster's "Reply to Haine" (1993: 435-440).

very promise of individuality and independence.[29] Again, Emerson cannot quite solve the conflict and remains decisively inconclusive in his comments about Amerca's renewal. Sacvan Bercovitch, in "Emerson, Individualism, and the Ambiguities of Dissent," points out a distinction of "individualism" – as a kind of *laissez-faire* acquisitiveness – and "individuality" – as a belief in the "absolute integrity, spiritual primacy, and inviolable sanctity of the self" (Bercovitch 1990: 632). With regards to the advent of liberalism, Bercovitch suggests that in Emerson, "individuality" serves as a kind of "Utopian rallying point against liberal ideology" (1990: 633). I am not sure, however, whether Bercovitch's observation applies unreservedly to Emerson's understanding of liberalism. In Emerson, the material and the spiritual are complementary aspects of selfhood and it is the very working together of both that for him defines the "liberal." This is why Emerson, on the one hand, regards capitalism as the "economic manifestation of contemporary individualism," as Milder points out (Milder 1999: 55), and, on the other, as its most serious threat. For Emerson, and for a growing number of free-market Democrats, capitalism held (according to a historical teleology specific to American culture) the promise of a better and freer world that included the progressive transferral of power from the church and the state to the people. Capitalism was thought to lead to a sort of culmination of history, and the excesses of the age – Emerson speaks of a "scornful materialism" (*W*, XI, 531) – were merely considered to be phenomena of transition in an age that would eventually end in America's (economic and political) maturity.

Emerson's direct confrontation with the forces America's economic revival is then also less controversial than Bercovitch would have it. Speaking to a group of young American traders and merchants in 1844, Emerson remarks:

> "The philosopher and lover of man have much harm to say of trade; but the historian will see that trade was the principle of Liberty; that trade planted America and destroyed Feudalism; that it makes peace and keeps peace, and it will abolish slavery. We complain of its oppression of the poor, and of its building up a new aristocracy on the ruins of the aristocracy it destroyed. But the aristocracy of trade has no permanence, is not entailed, was the result of toil and talent, the result of merit of some kind, and is continually falling, like the waves of the sea, before new claims of the same sort. Trade is an instrument in the hands of that friendly Power which works for us in our own despite. We design it thus and thus; it turns out otherwise and far better. This beneficent tendency, omnipotent without violence, exists and works. Every line of history inspires a confidence that we shall not go far wrong; that things mend. That is the moral of all we learn, that it warrants Hope, the prolific mother of reforms. Our part is plainly not to throw ourselves across the track, to block improvement, and sit till we

29 It has often been neglected, however, that the supposedly egalitarian structures of early American society were essentially supported by another divide, namely the racial one. On the formation of the early republic, as well as race and class in antebellum America, see Michael Rogin's excellent *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (1975), Michael A. Morrison's *Race and the Early Republic: Racial Consciousness and Nation-Building in the Early Republic* (2002) and John Wood Sweet's *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (2003).

> are stone, but to watch the uprise of successive mornings, and to conspire with the new works of new days. Government has been a fossil; it should be a plant." (*W*, I, 378-9)

The important thing to note here is not merely that Emerson's resistance to liberal market theory is not as pronounced as Bercovitch wants it to be. Clearly, he shares the optimistic outlook of most Americans that the new market economy will help solve America's "national defects" (*W*, I, 389). The interesting thing about "The Young American," from which I have been quoting, is that Emerson sees trade not as a kind of culmination, but, rather, as essentially a transitional phenomenon: "Trade was one instrument, but Trade is also but for a time, and must give way to somewhat broader and better, whose signs are already dawning in the sky" (*W*, I, 379). This is also why, in the same essay, he wants to "speak of the signs of that which is the sequel of trade" (*W*, I, 379).

> "In consequence of the revolution in the state of society wrought by trade, government in our times is beginning to wear a clumsy and cumbrous appearance. We have already seen our way to shorter methods. The time is full of good signs. Some of them shall ripen to fruit. All this beneficent socialism is a friendly omen, and the swelling cry of voices for the education of the people, indicates that Government has other offices than those of banker and executioner." (*W*, I, 379-80)

Again then, Emerson's qualification of his time is not merely a documentation of what is, it does not pretend to be able to representatively depict or predict the American experience. Emerson is interested in a potential yet unrealized, in a potentially different and better future for America that is yet only a "friendly omen" or noticeable but inconclusive change in the pitch of the masses (the "swelling cry of voices"). Emerson then is not the radical dissenter. Because the tendencies of the present age are in themselves contradictory, he believes that a radical stance could actually find it difficult to find its *point d'attaque*. Because the "to-day" presents itself as a heteroverse, as a configuration of emerging forces, the shape of America's future cannot be asserted by any kind of radical intervention.

It is telling, however, that Emerson has to recuperate what had then widely become the development of a nation in which the individual had no say anymore, as the story of an individual. In other words: precisely because the evolution of the nation was now governed by market forces and no longer by the teleological path provided for it by the myth of manifest destiny, Emerson has to conceive of it as the story of an individual. In an early lecture, Emerson insists on the value of the individual in bringing about historical change: "Progress is not for society, Progress belongs to the Individual" (*EL*, II, 176). Later, in the essay "Human Culture," the argument is already more complex:

> "The modern mind teaches (in extremes) that the nation exists for the individual; for the guardianship and education of every man. The Reformation contained the new thought. The English Revolution is its expansion. The American Declaration of Independence is a formal announcement of it by a nation to nations, though a very limited expression. [...] The Vote, – universal suffrage – is another; the downfall of war,

> the attack upon slavery, are others. The furious democracy which in this country from the beginning of its history, has shown a wish [...] to leave out men of mark and send illiterate and low persons as deputies, [...] is only a perverse or as yet obstructed operation of the same instinct, – a stammering and stuttering out of impatience to articulate the awful words I am." (*EL*, II, 213-4)

Emerson's equation of nation and individual, his recuperation of the nation's "furious" makeover as a narrative of adolescence will also be revisited in later essays. It is precisely because he knows that America's destiny is currently framed by forces larger than individualism that he insists on a kind of ethical imperative to assert the centrality of the individual, of individualism. In "Human Culture," he argues that "[t]here is historical progress in man" and so tries to relocate a historical progress that has become inscrutable as the working out of individual destiny rather than a contingent historical process. The "stammering and stuttering" that goes with this process of coming-of-age, however, already hint at the difficulties it implies. Finally, in "Experience," the individual ceases to serve as a rallying point of historical change. Now, Emerson argues that "the results of life are uncalculated and uncalculable" (*W*, III, 69). I think that the two movements – the *Wechselverhältnis* of the changing individual in the world and of the individual in a changing world – in Emerson combine to provide the kind of double bind that he identifies with any kind of historical change. It locates an ambivalence in which the individual is inextricable from the world and *vice versa*, the individual, as Emerson says in "History," "cannot live without a world" (W, II, 36). Similarly, in a journal entry in 1827, he suggests: "We are the changing habitants of a changing world" (*J*, 3, 72-73).

Again then, in the context of Emerson's assessment of America's (capitalist, ideological) renewal, his vision of historical change is essentially ambivalent: on the one hand, he knows that the dissolution of traditional bonds is an essential step in opening the route towards liberal democracy. On the other, he is aware of a certain materialism and, sometimes, anti-intellectualism that goes with it. He knows that principle of liberalism that marks America's advent as a world power also creates the very paradox of American politics and culture: The autonomy of the individual can no longer be paramount in country whose model of political and social evolution is founded upon the unrestrained activity of market economy. Various attempts have been made, in Emerson's life-time, at healing these contradictions inherent in the American project. Most of which cannot successfully

mediate between the forces of an unleashed, self-governing market economy and America's desire for an unchecked individualism.[30]

In "The Method of Nature," Emerson presents a remarkable analysis of the interaction between the preponderance of America's "material interest" and the peculiarity of American character in his time. He states that "[w]e are a puny and a fickle folk" (*W*, I, 191) and goes on to associate the agitatedness of his contemporaries with the growth of America's wealth.

> "The rapid wealth which hundreds in the community acquire in trade, or by the incessant expansions of our population and arts, enchants the eyes of all the rest; the luck of one is the hope of thousands, and the bribe acts like the neighborhood of a gold mine to impoverish the farm, the school, the church, the house, and the very body and feature of man." (*W*, I, 191)

Emerson here identifies a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the early nineteenth century remaking of America: the solidarity of the pastoral "community" is threatened by the very wealth it produces. For Emerson, the particularization of America's shared vision by the rapid accumulation of wealth by select individuals betrays the communal institutions (farm, school, church, family, etc.) that have in the past secured the success of the American model. In other words: While America's entry into the league of wealthy nation and its "incessant expansion" may rightfully make Americans proud, it can only be had at the price of a betrayal of the American project. The glorious expansion of the American nation for Emerson is consequently always already overshadowed by a concomitant "impoverishment" or decadence attributable to the particularization or 'individualization' of the common national destiny. It this particularization of the national destiny under Andrew Jackson's *laissez-faire* constitutionalism that researchers now commonly term the predominance of "self-interest" in early nineteenth-century America.[31] While Americans could still hope that there was a commonality of American goals and needs, America's ascent to a world mercantile power and its rapid social makeover changed it into a country in which the individual reigned supreme. Now, a strong tendency towards "self-interest" is the point of departure for a renovation American culture.

30 The numerous utopian projects springing up in Emerson's time – the Fourier-inspired enterprise of George Ripley's Brook Farm, the utopian family at Charles Lane and Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands, but also Thoreau's "community of one" at Walden Pond, to name but a few –, are all responses to America's change. They all try to vaguely address the contradictions caused by the hurried implementation of new forms of production and social organization. See Richard Francis' *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (1997: 2). For an overview of American utopian movements in the early 19th Century, see Carl Guarneri's seminal *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (1991) as well as Michael Fellman's, *The Unbounded Frame: Freedom and Community in Nineteenth Century American Utopianism* (1973). For Emerson's assessment of Fourierism, see his "Fourier and the Socialists" (Emerson 1842) "New England Reformers" (*W*, III, 249-285), as well a letter to Carlyle, in which he mocks contemporary reform efforts (*CEC*, 334-35).

31 For a history of "self-interest" in America, see for example John P. Diggins study on *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundations of Liberalism* (1986: on Emerson, esp. 192-228, on Tocqueville, esp. 230-275).

Because the consequences of these developments are yet unobservable, contemporary commentaries frequently return to the topos of a specifically American agitatedness or restlessness. Tocqueville, for example, speaking of the characteristic "restlessness" (*inquiétude*) of the American people (*DiA*, 328, see also 620-628), precisely means to identify these "restless passions" (*DiA*, 328) as something that is not yet made commensurate with the American project. Just as for Emerson, for Tocqueville the recent developments make this American age a transitional one. Its promise lies not in what it currently offers, but in what unforeseeable consequences – Tocqueville terms them "miracles" – it may entail. This is why Tocqueville holds that America's political future is yet inscrutable.[32]

> "Democracy does not give the people the most skillful government, but what it does even the most skillful government is powerless to achieve: it spreads throughout society a restless activity, a superabundant strength, an energy that never exists without it, and which, if circumstances are even slightly favorable, can accomplish miracles." (*DiA*, 280-1)

This is then Tocqueville's paradoxical equation: precisely because the Americans are essentially a "commercial people" (*DiA*, 365), the United States are a country of "superabundant strength" and "energy" where "constant flux" and "universal movement" (*DiA*, 466) "combine to keep the soul in a sort of febrile agitation" (*DiA*, 466), so that "the ceaseless agitation that democratic government introduces into politics then spreads to civil society" (*DiA*, 279). Tocqueville also observes, that this is also responsible for the flexibility of America's body politic, but he is never quite sure what to make of this American unrest:

> "All [Americans] consider society a body in progress and mankind a changing tableau in which nothing is or should be fixed forever, and they admit that what seems good to them today may be replaced tomorrow by something better but as yet hidden from view." (*DiA*, 432, see also 246 and 365)

Tocqueville identifies this transitionality as the outstanding feature of the American experience and his *Democracy in America* is in large part an attempt to give an adequate theoretical description of this experience. Yet Tocqueville, the French aristocrat, in the last instance is not willing to follow through the implications of his analysis as he calls for a strict organization and control of democracy's "savage instincts" and wants to "regulate its impulses" in order to "educate democracy" (*DiA*, 7). Tocqueville is indeed anxious about the unlimited freedom that the dogma of the sovereignty of the people (essentially expressed in terms of

32 When Tocqueville speaks of the notion of "association," he does so clearly with reference to Channing's elaboration of the notion as outlined above. Both Channing and Tocqueville – who had met to discuss religion, democracy and economy in Boston on October 3, 1831 – are intuitively aware that the principle of random, ungoverned "association" provides an explanation for the workings of American democracy in the present moment. I believe, however, that there is an elitist side to Tocqueville that is greatly concerned about the ungovernability of association. For Tocqueville's interview with Channing, see Pierson's *Tocqueville in America* (1996: 421-423).

individual independence and free associations) promises. This unlimited freedom to him is the "deficiency" of democracy and, anxious about the ungovernability of society in democracy, he calls for a strict governance of the relations among its citizens, i.e. for a hierarchisation of society in terms of what he calls a "natural aristocracy" (*DiA*, 58). *Democracy in America* consequently has to be read as Tocqueville's attempt at imagining how the unbridled movement of democracy can be limited and turned into more stable democratic institutions.[33] But what makes Tocqueville's account of his journeys in America especially relevant to our concerns here is that his descriptions repeatedly identify not just the current, actual state of American democracy but, rather, elements that cannot be incorporated within the standard procedure of historical documentation that Tocqueville was commissioned to complete. Tocqueville himself acknowledges that his topic, 'America,' would in fact require a different mode of documentation because how it evolves cannot yet be made to conform to the standard historical template of cause and effect.

> "A world that is totally new demands a new political science. To this need, however, we have given little thought. Immersed in a rapidly flowing stream, we stubbornly fix our eyes on the few pieces of debris still visible on the shore, while the current carries us away and propels us back into the abyss." (*DiA*, 7)

Tocqueville's account of the American experience is thus more effectively an account of the uncertain passage from one political state to another. But the "rapidly flowing stream" of current events (the emergence of democracy) cannot yet be described without sorting out those "pieces of debris" left behind by older forms of political organization. In Tocqueville's narrative, we find ourselves in a kind of interregnum, in a strange kind of *Zwischenzeit*, in which the old (aristocracy) is no longer universally valid while the new (democracy) has not been fully realized yet. And indeed, Tocqueville's account of the democracy in America is not so much an account of democracy itself as it is an attempt at coming to terms with that transitional or intermediary state that will potentially lead to

33 Tocqueville describes the American West as the place where democracy has been brought to its extreme limit: "In the West it was possible to observe democracy pushed to its ultimate limit. In these states, in a sense improvised by fortune, people lived on land to which they had come only a short while before. They barely knew one another, and none knew the history of his nearest neighbor. In this part of the American continent, the population therefore escaped the influence not only of great names and great wealth but also of that natural aristocracy which derives from enlightenment and virtue. … The new states of the West were already inhabited, but no society existed there." (*DiA*, 58) Tocqueville's main objection is that the principle of equality, taken to its full potential, would not result in a society but a "dis-society," as Pierre Manet has phrased it in his *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy:* "[The West in Tocqueville] is the exaggerated image of democracy. The radical severing of the social links that democracy introduces opens us to the image of democracy as a 'dis-society'" (1996: 12).

democracy.[34] But Tocqueville realizes that traditional models of historical writing can only inadequately convey the urgency of such an intermediary phase in history. This is why he calls not only for a new "political science" but for new modes of writing that would effectively render the urgency of the new world. Because this urgency cannot be documented in a historical narrative – that is: as a matter of development and linear evolution –, Tocqueville clearly lacks the descriptive means to specify more precisely America's state as that of an emerging form.

Both Emerson and Tocqueville thus conceive of the emergence of America's political form as a process of transition whose final outcome cannot yet be assessed. We can conceive of this transition as the waning of Puritanism or as the transition from a democracy that is authoritatively led by its founding fathers to a democracy that is governed by the all-encompassing laws of free market economy. But what is more important in our context is that for Emerson and his contemporaries, America's transition exposes a contradiction inherent in the American project: it shows that the relation of self-interest and the advancement of the common good – that America as a cultural concept stood for and that late-eighteenth-century political theory had still held possible – can never quite be coordinated or balanced. One necessarily needs to exploit the other in order to be successful.[35]

The conundrum of the interaction of individual aim and the common good was not only a concern in America. But its theoretical elaboration in the works of Adam Smith and, later, Hegel, roughly coincides with the constitution of America as an independent nation. The conundrum gains special weight in America because America grants special privileges to the individual while also insisting on its communal values. Emerson, who had read Adam Smith, was skeptical about his solution to the riddle of the difficult coordination of individualism – the individual seeking profit – and communal improvement or evolution – through the mechanism of an unregulated market. His reading of Cousin's introduction to Hegelian philosophy – *Cours de l'histoire de la philosophie moderne* (Cousin 1846) – would also have made him aware of the problems involved in Smith's account

34 Furthermore, there are passages in *Democracy in America* that speak of a complex exchange when it is not entirely clear whether Tocqueville speaks of the American situation or of the complex process of change by which the political European feudal system is replaced by new forms of government. This may also explain why Tocqueville's definition of democracy constantly has to change, the tropical movement of the term "democracy" suggesting the instability of the processes by which the political state of democracy is achieved. For the characteristic 'instability' of the term "democracy" in *Democracy in America*, see (1996: 158-159).

35 Emerson was also familiar with Adam Smith's answer to the paradox of coordinating communal evolution and individual good in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1976) in which Smith describes, how what he terms the "commercial" or "mercantile system", with its principle of stock accumulation, is radically incommensurable with forms of individual labor. While Smith's book advocates policies that stimulate private enterprise, it must also concede that private enterprise effectively hinders the workings of a commercial society. Smith solves this conflict by introducing the famous principle of the "invisible hand".

who proposed that the coordination of the individual and the social would be ensured by the conduit of an "invisible hand". Emerson knew from Hegel, that the puzzling out of the interaction of an individual "Zweck" and a more generally understood "Beförderung des Allgemeinen" (*TWA*, XII, 38) was always problematic. But while Hegel still thinks that to follow individual goals will also serve the common good, Emerson registers that Hegel is at a loss to explain more precisely how this transaction takes place. It is, as Hegel says, necessarily "incalculable," a term that Emerson adopts and uses frequently.[36] Gustaaf van Cromphout describes how Emerson conceives of the dialectical workings of the Soul in history, and I think that this description can also be read to apply to Emerson's understanding of America's historical transition (from an 'extension' of Europe to a 'natively' American democracy):

> "The Soul progresses by means of a continual *dédoublement*, a continual *Entzweiung*, a continual self-division. It moves from living experience and expression in an individual to "death" in a tradition or institution – a "death" from which the Soul can escape only through revolt, that is, through a new individual who experiences and expresses the Soul afresh." (van Cromphout 1976: 54-65, 56).

Alienation is therefore both the necessary cause as well as the result of historical development. To illustrate this, Emerson uses the example of religion, in which he himself had to leave what he perceived to be a culture that had grown into a 'dead' tradition. As he argues in a lecture on George Fox in 1835:

> "The creed, the rites of an age can never fit the next. Let the Reformer define his creed never so accurately or establish what severe Rule of Discipline he will, in a short time he dies, and his friends who shared his spirit die, his own fire cannot be transmitted and soon their places are filled by a generation who read their prayers and observe their ceremonies with excessive punctuality, but the essence of religion, that is, its origin in the worshipper's soul is wanting. But Nature never fails. Instantly the divine Light rekindles in some other obscure heart who denounces the deadness of the church and cries aloud for new and more appropriate practices. Thus every church, the purest, becomes speedily old and dead, and only a new church is alive. Thus the Protestants reformed the Catholic church; the Presbyterians, the Protestant; the Independents, the Presbyterian; the Quaker, the Independent; but of the same new impulse arose still later the Methodist and now the Swedenborgian or New Jerusalem Church." (*EL*, I, 174)

The moment of transition, I take Emerson to say, is unconceptualisable and unnarratable: it can only be reconstructed after the fact, once its consequences have been fully realized. If we want to be attentive to the possibility of epochal change, however, we need to precisely not look into the common sense historical accounts of who we are, but rather, at that "obscure heart [...] that cries aloud for

36 Hegel's conundrum of an "Umschlag" from individual aim to common good as a transaction that cannot be calculated was correctly conceptualized only by Marx. Marx was the first historical thinker who went beyond Hegel's more mechanical historicism to suggest that it is in fact the individual who produces his world himself, so that he is effectively always the source of his own history. On the American reception of Hegel in the early 19th Century, see J. H. Muirhead, *How Hegel Came to America* (1928).

new and more appropriate practices". Properly speaking, then, if America's transition is to be effected, it cannot simply be a question of politically administering it, because it is cause by the marginal forces or voices that have not yet been made a part of America's ideology or cultural imaginary.

"Emerson's emergence," to use a phrase coined by Mary Kupiec Cayton (Cayton 1989), and his formation as a young intellectual consequently happens both within and against the predominant beliefs of his time. Indeed, „Emerson's emergence" is intimately connected to the historical developments and the transformations that New England undergoes in the first half of the nineteenth century but it also has to be understood as precisely a critical reaction against these developments and transformations. This may explain why Emerson's assessment of his time remains ambivalent. For him, America's makeover during the time in which he started his career was always the source both of an enthusiasm – because it implied change – as well as of an anxiety – because the nature of that change could not be anticipated.[37] For Emerson and others, the discrepancy of the time between radicalism and conservatism makes this a peculiar time: it spawns the random phenomena of a present or, rather, *Zwischenzeit* whose conflicting destinies have not yet been decided and whose legacy cannot be known yet.

Emerson frequently returns to the moment of a such an ambivalent "present age" that he reads as an intermittent but recurring period in history that calls for a decision, a "revelation" (*W*, I, 135) or, as he calls it in "The American Scholar," a "conversion of the world" (*W*, I, 115). Alongside his enthusiasm, however, a more defeatist attitude subsists, for example when Emerson, in "The Young American," talks about the "clumsy and cumbrous appearance" (W, I, 380) of his time, or when, in "Gift," he remarks that America's capitalist makeover makes the interaction between individuals themselves "oblique" (*W*, III, 164). Also, in the same essay, he says: "Besides, our action on each other, good as well as evil, is [...] incidental and at random" (W, III, 164).

Emerson's attempt at conceptualizing this kind of *Zwischenzeit* and his lifelong poetic venture to find a mode of expression adequate to the urgency of America's change in the present, consequently also speaks of a more general conundrum of self-location and, again, of specifying America's "spirit of the age". Just as Tocqueville –, who was unable to find an answer to his question "Where, then, do things stand?" (*DiA*, 13) – Emerson asks Americans: "Where do we find ourselves?"

37 For a discussion of the origins of Transcendentalism, see Barbara Packer, "The Transcendentalists: Prose Writing 1820-1865" in the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (Packer 1995) and Perry Miller, *The American Transcendentalists, Their Prose and Poetry* (Miller 1981: 16-105). As Kenneth Sacks has argued with respect to Emerson's essay "The American Scholar" in his *Understanding Emerson:* "Unitarians suffered the inevitable fate of a group that had effected half a revolution" (2003: 24). Andrew Delbanco has also argued that Unitarians "moved with deep insecurity, less in celebration than in flight form an old house collapsing. The Unitarians, in the end, committed themselves to living in a world of ambiguity between two worlds of clarity, the orthodox and the romantic. And they knew it" (Delbanco 1981: 85). Delbanco's essay concerns itself primarily with Channing, but much of what he has to say would also be a fitting description of Emerson's situation.

(*W*, III, 45), but he knows that the answer to this question will not be a straightforward one. If the signature of America's current age cannot be discovered, then it is because for Emerson America is exactly a political exigency or urgency, rushing headlong into an unknown political future. Tocqueville, a mere decade ago, had viewed America's "wild freedom" (*W*, II, 34) with utmost reservation and had called for its strict regimentation by the authorities. Alike, many Americans themselves considered America's ungoverned growth to be a mere idiosyncrasy, resulting from a political system that had not yet been properly installed or was deficient in the first place. Emerson, on the other hand, is prepared to receive the full impact of such an ungoverned *Zwischenzeit* because he sees in it a more radical potential for change that could uproot what America had meant all along and thus make a qualitatively different future possible.

Emerson's Journals of the 30s and 40s show him to be a studious examiner of the "peculiarities of the present age" (*J*, II, 164). These journals provide an astute, almost encyclopaedic record of the conflicting tendencies of American culture during these decades. But already in the early journals we see another tendency that concerns itself less with what can be verified, less with what can be specified, but rather with a potential for what he in his essays later calls "conversion" or "revelation". Even tough he is a historical thinker that contextualizes his thought within the historical situation, he is, even in early texts in the journals, interested in symptoms of flux or transition. Combined then with a general ambition to specify a uniquely American experience, we find in Emerson a concurrent interest in the potential of a liminal moment of transition, as he carefully observes how a supposedly commonsensical vision of America is troubled by the emergence of cultural rifts and of antagonistic destinies. Personally, Emerson is strongly involved in the conflict between liberals and conservatives within New England Congregationalism and performs America's transition from the Puritan age to mid-nineteenth-century American culture as his very own biographical crisis. But in our context, such a moment is not merely of biographical importance, I think it also speaks of a more profound reconfiguration of the American cultural imaginary. Along the strongly foundational tones of American scripture, there is a special kind of preparedness for such moments of transition in American culture. It was not merely the young Unitarian ministers who tried to synchronize their religious training with the vision of a more secular conversion. The legacy of American religious doctrine, even tough rapidly waning in Emerson's lifetime, also for Emerson and his contemporaries provides some of the resources and structures to deal with the change at hand.

In his study on the *American Jeremiad*, Sacvan Bercovitch has presented a convincing argument that American religious doctrine and especially the jeremiad were a rich source of stories, themes, as well as metaphors and symbols that provided and perpetuated the narrative of a shared American experience and

identity (Bercovitch 1978). He argues that the cultural values and topics of the jeremiad spread well beyond their religious origin so that the Puritan vision of a history divined for the American people became coterminous with "America." Bercovitch argues that the cohesiveness of this vision, and this is especially pertinent in our context, derives from its peculiar organization of a cultural temporality: it effectively combines the Puritan ethos and the rhetoric of the errand into the wilderness with the promise of the Revolution to make the future present in a "cultural, not a national, myth of consensus" (1978: 69). Because the Puritans saw themselves as God's chosen people who had been given a second chance in a new world hitherto hidden from the old by God's special providence, they had to bend the future back into the present: America *is* the promised land and the American people need no longer wait for their hopes to be accomplished in some distant future. The typological system of Puritan scripture is precisely meant to guarantee a transfer in which the biblical prophesies are made to bear upon life in America in the present moment. Given enough religious devotion and hard labor they could all be made manifest in the present. Of course this cultural myth of consensus, as Bercovitch is right to point out, is all predicated on a (sectarian) Old World eschatology, but it nevertheless finds a new focal point in the reorganization of a temporal chronology with the culture's present at its centre. This vision of America in which America comes to be present with itself, in which the myth of America is firmly installed in the land that was named America, in which the promised land is the present and not some distant future hard to predict, remains with Americans even after America's modernization or 'secularization' in the late 18th and 19th Centuries. What is at stake, consequently, in this temporal reconfiguration of American culture and of the American imaginary, is America's self-presentation and with it the Puritan proposition of a destiny manifest in the present. If America is the promise of the providential future become manifest in the present than the failure to live up to this promise would yield catastrophic consequences: it would not only abash Puritan doctrine, it would also confound the existence of 'America' *per se*, that is, both as a nation *and* as a cultural concept.

As a trained Unitarian minister, Emerson was well aware of the theological discussions concerning the nature of the times in America. After all, the first half of the nineteenth century in America was also shaped by a general religious re-mobilization and the formation of a great number of new sectarian groups (the so-called *Second Great Awakening*). Emerson himself would have scanned the sign of the times with "the attention of a latter-day millennialist looking for signs of second coming", as Robert Milder has argued (Milder 1999: 51). For Emerson, the circular identification of 'America' with its millennial promise, with a certain temporal structure and cultural myth harbours both a promise and a danger. On the one hand, this peculiar temporal and cultural organization of the American imaginary, this focus on a "spirit of the present age" is what makes 'America' different from

the Old World. It identifies America's fundamental freedom "to begin the world anew," as Thomas Paine (Paine 1945: I, 21) and Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (St. John de Crèvecoeur 1972: 230) have both expressed it. On the other hand, Emerson realizes that the promise of a promised land already installed in the present harbours a tyrannical possibility, namely that of the tyranny of facts. If the future is present today, if it is manifest now, then why would we insist on change, why would we want to become something different from what we are now? Emerson believes that a potential for change is tantamount to his creed of moral perfectionism. He insists that American self-culture must necessarily insist on a moment of "revelation" (*W*, I, 3), or, as he would later phrase it, of "abandonment" (*W*, II, 321) or even "madness" (*W*, I, 4), that is, of something that could be seen as a "secularized analogue to religious conversion" (Milder 1999: 56), as Milder points out. Milder reads Emerson's insistence on a moment of "conversion" or "revelation" as Emerson's very own brand of political radicalism, a stance that becomes radical precisely by not accepting the factual. Emerson witnesses the waning of the Puritan age and the advent of *laissez-faire* capitalism as a "moment of cultural self-definition" (Milder 1999: 55) that presents itself as a conflict of individualism and materialism. A radical political stance, for Emerson, means to cut the ties between selfhood and materialism or commercial achievement altogether and thus to clear the way for a more sustained "revelation" or "conversion". As Emerson argues in a passage in his journal early in 1834:

> "Men are convertible. […] They want awakening. Get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep, out into God's universe, to a perception of its beauty & hearing of its Call and […] your prosy, selfish sensualist awakes a God & is conscious of force to shape the world." (*J*, III, 278)

Emerson's Faustian dilemma

Emerson defines the present cultural moment as being "in the present, above time" (*W*, II, 67), beyond the perceived continuum of tradition, a continually vanishing moment between the directions of historical time. America's 'spirit of the time' can consequently not be specified and America is the counter-example to historicist doctrine. And Emerson believes that any specification of America's spirit of the time must necessarily remain inconclusive. It cannot be deduced from the nation's short history, just as it seems impossible to predict its future. Looking back a few decades later, in a lecture on the "Fortune of the Republic" in 1863, Emerson argues that the prevalence of the present moment in American culture can explain why it finds it so difficult to specify its place in history: "Our estimate of America is variable. Yesterday is insignificant; today, all-commanding (*LL*, II, 326).

We therefore need to revisit Emerson's peculiar ambidexterity, that is, the odd ways in which his writing endorses both what David Reynolds has called a

"Reform Impulse" (Reynolds 1989: 72) as well as more conservative agendas. This undecidedness on Emerson's part functions as an important modification of the discourse of cultural and historical specificity established by his contemporaries: Emerson denies that the specificity of the "age" can be determined because for him the potentiality of the present is always greater than the historical narrative in which it will be integrated. This is why both conservative and radical-progressive agendas necessarily carry a moment of dogmatism in them because they do not take into account the actual, as yet unorganized potentiality of a lived present. As he phrases it in a central passage in "Self-Reliance":

> "[M]an postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time." (*W*, II 67)

As a consequence, if Emerson's assessment of America's present moment is occasionally incoherent, at times even unintelligible, then this is precisely because he pays attention to the radically contingent nature of events in this present. Any attempt at coming to terms with the present both in terms of the agendas of the past as well as those of the future can therefore only be successful if it does attend to the multiplicity of voices in the present. But these will always resist historical periodisation, and no historicism can bring them to coherence. Emerson's qualification of the moment of the present as "above time" is thus not only meant to suggest that the present's events have not yet been 'digested' by historical discourse. It also reminds us that the facticity of the present – its contradictory forms and incalculable events – for Emerson is necessarily composed of both remainders of the past – Emerson calls this the "sediment" (*W*, I, 197) – as well as of the potential for a future that is yet to come, for a future that is qualitatively different from the past and the present moment – the "seed of the world" (*W*, II, 346).

The two Emersonian voices, contradictory as they may be, should therefore not be severed too easily. If Emerson lets them speak simultaneously, then this is also meant to imply that the present stage of culture cannot be depicted representatively and that there is thus no representative expression of the spirit of the age. Emerson thus presents himself as both the transcendentalist, imagining a Hegelian America at the end of history, as well as the argus-eyed observer that points out the internal contradictions and concrete failures of the American vision. One should therefore not easily divide Emerson into what Cary Wolfe has called "the transcendentalist trying to make his break and his peace with the religious tradition" and Emerson the "social and cultural critic" (Wolfe 1994: 137) eager to describe Jacksonian America: Emerson is always both radical and conservative, and he at once participates in and distances himself from the developments of his time. Also, I do not think that these different stances can be narrated in the terms of a

biographical development. In Emerson, the moods of activism or engagement and distancing or "abandonment" are always simultaneous, they modify and condition each other, but they are the two necessary poles of any political action or thought. He thinks that the political, as we will see in Chapter Five, happens precisely in the undecidable space between political projects and programmes. For Emerson, the dilemma of politics thus consists not so much in a decision for one or the other political stance, but rather in the fact that this decision can never effectively be made.

It is important therefore to spot under Emerson's cheerful transcendentalism a more introverted or melancholy discontent. This is why the high spirits of the decades of Jacksonian progressivism for Emerson coincide with "the age of severance, of dissociation" (*W*, X, 326). And in "The Transcendentalist," he insists that the two moods necessarily combine to provide transcendentalism's "double consciousness" (*W*, X, 353).[38] Looking back in 1884, Emerson describes his age as a time in which the power of association seemed to decline. The mood of the age therefore suggested solitude and not the communal values and warmth that the Arcadian ideal of America stands for.

And he famously writes: "The young men were born with knives in their brain, a tendency to introversion, self-dissection, anatomizing of motives" (*W*, X, 329). In this context, it seems only relevant that Emerson should refer to Goethe's *Faust* to further specify the spirit of dissociation: "The most remarkable literary work of the age has for its hero and subject precisely this introversion" (*W*, X, 328). Why Faust: Goethe had come up with the central portrait of the soul divided between the sensual and the spiritual, the material and the rational. Certainly Emerson would have known the famous lines in which Faust defines his crisis:

„Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! In meiner Brust,
Die eine will sich von der anderern trennen;
Die eine hält, in derber Liebeslust,
Sich an die Welt mit klammernden Organen;
Die andre hebt gewaltsam sich vom Dunst
Zu den Gefilden hoher Ahnen." (Goethe 1999: l.1112-1117)[39]

Just as Faust's dilemma is not just the dilemma of an individual, but that of the precarious passage across an epochal threshold, so is Emerson's double consciousness not merely his own idiosyncrasy. For Emerson, this kind of ambidexterity expresses precisely the logic of a historicism that refuses to reduce the chaos and crisis of history into a neat and inclusive narrative. Wanting to

38 My account of Emerson's "double consciousness" is indebted to Joel Porte's article on "Emerson, Thoreau, and the Double Consciousness" (Porte 1968).

39 Emerson was introduced to Goethe by his brother William, who sought the counsel of the great German writer in Weimar during his studies in Göttingen. For the Emerson – Goethe connection, see Sigrid Bauschinger, *The Trumpet of Reform: German Literature in Nineteenth-Century New England* (1998; and McCarthy 1994) and John McCarthy, "Emerson, Goethe und die Deutschen" (1994).

embrace the present world while knowing that one can never completely leave behind the past: this, for Emerson, is the sign of America's modernity.

Emerson called Goethe, in the portrait of him that he presents in Representative Men, "the soul of his century". But when Emerson takes recourse to the Faustian problem, then he does so precisely to complicate a nineteenth-century discourse of heroism and representative men. Because Faust, as Emerson reads him, serves as an example that contradicts this discourse's basic tenets of representativeness. In 1795, Goethe posed the question "Wann und wo entsteht ein klassischer National-autor" and argued that a prerequisite was a "glückliche und bedeutende Einheit" (Goethe 1963: 240). Emerson, when he revisits the writing of Goethe in his "Representative Men," judges such a unity to be always illusory. Rather, he argues that Goethe – or Faust, for that matter – are epoch-makers precisely because they possess a potential that overflows the possibilities offered by their age. In Emerson's understanding, Goethe becomes "representative" precisely because he is not reducible to a kind of exemplary representativeness, precisely because he expresses more than just his specific historical circumstances.

If modern life is a "multitude of things" (*W*, IV, 271), Emerson writes in "Representative Men," then Goethe is the first writer that able to render this multitude as a multitude in writing. Emerson sees Goethe – himself "coming into an over-civilized time and country" (*W*, IV, 271) – situated in the cleft between two epochs, facing a "mountaineous miscellany" (*W*, IV, 289). And Goethe for Emerson becomes a representative man not because he expresses a unified spirit of time, but rather because he himself and his writing are complex symptoms of transition.[40]

> "Goethe was the philosopher of this multiplicity; hundred-handed, Argus-eyed, able and happy to cope with this rolling miscellany of facts and sciences, and, by his own versatility, to dispose of them with ease; a manly mind, unembarrassed by the variety of coats of convention, with which life had got incrusted, easily able by his subtlety to pierce these." (*W*, IV, 271)

Goethe's writing, Emerson argues, does not simply express an exemplary contemporariness, it becomes "reflective" or "critical" because it poetically transcends its historical context. Therefore, his works are not simply

> "wild miraculous songs, but elaborate forms, to which the poet has confided the results of eighty years of observation. This reflective and critical wisdom makes the poem more truly the flower of this time. It dates itself. Still he is a poet, - poet of a prouder laurel than any contemporary, and, under this plague of microscopes (for he seems to see out of every pore of his skin), strikes the harp with a hero's strength and grace." (*W*, IV, 272)

The double consciousness is thus also to be found in the discrepancy between a mere recording of historical facts and the power of a poetics that suggests its very

40 For an account of Goethe as a writer in-between times, see Stefan Blessin's seminal *Goethes Romane. Aufbruch in die Moderne* (1996).

own temporality by transcending the historical situation from which it results. As Emerson learns from Goethe, the poem "dates itself," that is, its rhetorical structures perform a temporality that is not reducible to the time of history. But it may be – as in the case of Goethe and other "representative" writers – that poetry's suggestions of a different temporality will let us establish a sense of history that may have been lost to us before. Against the dilemma of the historian – "the plague of microscopes" – Emerson promotes the moment of poetry – a "strik[ing] of the harp with a hero's strength and grace" – as a moment of form-giving, of bringing into harmony.

Emerson therefore maintains that Goethe's contemporariness, his representativeness as an individual of his time, is not something that can be taken for granted. It is only asserted in writing where Goethe gives a (poetic) form to the "detached atoms" of contemporary experience.

> "He was the soul of his century. If that was learned, and had become, by population, compact organization, and drill of parts, one great Exploring Expedition, accumulating a glut of facts and fruits too fast for any hitherto-existing savans to classify, this man's mind had ample chambers for the distribution of all. He had a power to unite the detached atoms again by their own law." (W, IV, 273)

What makes Goethe the soul of his century is consequently not the fact that he "representatively" documents contemporary experience. Rather, he becomes a representative man because he has, as Emerson expresses it, "clothed our modern existence with poetry" (*W*, IV, 273).

> "Amid littleness and detail, he detected the Genius of life, the old cunning Proteus, nestling close beside us, and showed that the dulness and prose we ascribe to the age was only another of his masks: – 'His very flight is presence in disguise'." (*W*, IV, 273)

The mythological figure of Proteus with its mutable forms for Emerson thus expresses a mode of poetic existence that alone can bring together the disassociated states of mind implied by the age's double consciousness. Poetry in Emerson's exemplary analysis of Goethe's "great Exploring Expedition" (*W*, IV, 273) is thus the medium in which we may come to terms with the conflicting potentialities of our age.

> "The wonder of the book is its superior intelligence. In the menstruum of this man's wit, the past and the present ages, and their religions, politics and modes of thinking, are dissolved into archetypes and ideas. What new mythologies sail through his head! The Greeks said that Alexander went as far as Chaos; Goethe went, only the other day, as far; and one step farther he hazarded, and brought himself safe back." (*W*, IV, 272-3)

In "The Transcendentalist," Emerson applies the dilemma of *zwei Seelen* explicitly to his own age when he points out that America's state of mind constantly oscillates between an idealist and a materialist "state of thought": "These two states of thought diverge every moment, and stand in wild contrast" (*W*, I, 353). Even tough he praises the former, he professes that there can be no pure idealists and

that even the most radical of Transcendentalists have to accept their dual nature between the material and the ideal. This is because the transcendentalist – leaping beyond the actualities of contemporary life of the 1830s and early 40s, imagining a different future for America – cannot do without the realist precisely because the promise of a future revolution has to be wrested from the conflicting potentialities of the present, of the contemporary.

Emerson's different personae in the essays position him flexibly between radical and conservative agendas. His early radicalism curiously coincides, for example, with his refusal to take part in the utopian project of Brook farm. His intervention on behalf of abolition – beginning with the 1844 address on "Emancipation in the 'British West Indies'," – make him a "committed social activist [...] very much involved with, and interested in, the abolition of slavery" (Gougeon 1990: 19). At the same time – in some of the essays of the *Second Series*, most notably in "Experience" –, he abandons the hope for a general cultural reform. Emerson's doubleness, his indecision or indetermination in political matters, becomes even more obvious if we consider that the time in which Emerson refused to comment on the problem of slavery in America – a time that Len Gougenon has called his "silent years" (Gougeon 1982) – was precisely the period in which he resolutely voiced his opposition to free market ideology.

Emerson's indecision thus speaks of a situation in which America's competing destinies have not yet been decided. It would therefore be a mistake to reduce Emerson's doubleness to one consistent persona (the "Transcendentalist", the "Pragmatist", etc.) in his essays. Joel Porte suggests that the young Transcendentalists, suffering from this double consciousness, "were all New England Fausts" torn between "earthly lust" and "spiritual strivings" so that hence "they were dualists" (Porte 1968: 42). But just as Faust's tension is not merely one of character but much more one of two irreconcilable worlds, so Emerson's "double consciousness" also applies both to the mood of his age as well as to his own conflicting sentiments between radical reformer and skeptic aquietist. Rather, with Emerson's lecture about the "Present Age" his stance becomes critical: critical insofar as he examines carefully both the "drama of engagement" as well as that of "proselytism" (Milder 1999: 51).

For Emerson, the existence of conflicting cultural values and attitudes goes without saying. America's problem is that Goethe's achievement, to have brought to common knowledge the conflicting attitudes of his culture in writing, has not yet found its corresponding expression in a *natively* American literature. Emerson consequently contends that the problem does not simply lie in the double consciousness itself. Rather, he argues, it is the lack of a shared cultural imaginary, the lack of a willingness to confront conflicting cultural destinies in writing, in philosophy, etc., that is the cause of America's predicament in the present moment. As he argues in "The Transcendentalist":

> "The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other, never meet and measure each other: one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves." (*W*, I, 353)

In "Circles," Emerson condescends that "[o]ur moods do not believe in each other" (W, I, 306), but he insists that it is precisely this kind of conflictual *Zwiesprache* that brings to light the open and contradictory constitution of American culture and, consequently, it may alert us to the present's potential for change. Emerson then places his hope in the artist or the writer because he thinks that he alone can imaginatively heal the drama of the two minds and creatively see a union in the multiplicity of things. And this is precisely what makes the writings of Goethe and other "representative" men so extraordinarily valuable to Emerson.

Various attempts at outlining a "de-transcendentalized" Emerson (Lopez 1988) have overlooked that a characteristic attribute of the poet, of the "American Scholar," or of the "Representative Man" in Emerson's essays is their disposition towards "transcendence," "conversion," "abandonment," or "madness". That is: even tough the writer, scholar or genius necessarily responds to the facticity of his situation and, in fact, needs to respond to it if he wants to change it, the occurrence of the metamorphosis (of the age, of the writer, etc.) itself is inexplicable, it happens as an incalculable moment of "conversion" (*W*, I, 115), "transcendence" (*W*, III, 181) or "madness" (*W*, I, 4). This admittance of a moment of radical difference or alterity, I think, makes Emerson's model of the "representative man" a much more radical one than that of Hegel's "welthistorische Individuen" as described in the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (*TWA*, XII, 49). Both the "representative man" and the "welthistorische Individuum" – which clearly forms an important subtext for Emerson – exhibit a historical intuition precisely by not being reducible to their contemporary age. Emerson, however, radicalizes Hegel's model when he exemplarily talks about the admired Wordsworth as the writer that is a "genius that hath epilepsy, a deranged archangel" (*J*, II, 534). Especially the poet, through his exposure to a certain potential *in and of language*, can give form to that which is entirely without precedent, to that which does not conform to any kind of expectation. For Emerson, consequently, any "representative" writer needs to on the one hand read "the signs of the times" (*J*, VII, 402). On the other, he needs to extrapolate from these signs something that he calls a "tendency" (*W*, I, 340), an "intuition" (*W*, I, 127), or, even, an "apotheosis" (*W*, IV, 31). It is precisely in the idiosyncrasy of something that is not reducible to contemporary moods and manners that Emerson finds the "ability to perceive" and the "courage to espouse the inevitable next step in the Soul's historic march," as Gustaaf van Cromphout argues (van Cromphout 1976: 56). But this is effected not by a strategic act of writing, but by an

incalculable, creative or "poetic" leap beyond the actualities and utterances of a given age.

When Emerson confirms what he calls "the fact which is the upshot of all history," namely "that a true man [...] is the centre of things," that he can make "all circumstances indifferent" and is "a cause, a country, an age" (*W*, II, 60-61), then we also need to remember that this "true man" for him, just as later for Nietzsche, necessarily is beyond common morality. And even though he believes in the centrality of man, he also insists that it is a result not of an individual will or decision, but rather the consequence of a certain exposure to the facticity or contingency of his situation, of the "to-day". Writing is the medium in which this changing or contingent relation of man and the world can be recorded, can be given a form, as he argues in "Circles":

> "There are no fixtures to men, if we appeal to consciousness. Every man supposes himself not to be fully understood; and if there is any truth in him, if he rests at last on the divine soul, I see not how it can be otherwise. The last chamber, the last closet, he must feel was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable. That is, every man believes that he has a greater possibility. Our moods do not believe in each other. To-day I am full of thoughts and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression, to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall. (*W*, I, 306-307)

Man's "greater possibility" is thus a consequence of not being fully "analyzable". But his "residuum unknown" does not simply come into being as the exception to the rational structure of the human. As Emerson explains, it is alerts us to the "unanalyzable" facticity of human life, its shift of moods, attitudes, and sentiments. Writing can express this facticity, but it does so not by providing a "representative" expression of the facts of the "to-day", but, rather, by exhibiting its very own logic and temporality ("What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world"). It is precisely, Emerson argues, because there is such a a "power of expression," such a kind of poetic *Eigensinn* that writing can express man's "greater possibility" in the moment of the "to-day," in-between the ages. And equally strong focus on the irreducible facticity of both the moment of human experience and that of writing can also be found in the lecture on Goethe in "Representative Men," where Emerson explains why even the most ingenious creation necessarily commences from it. He concedes that even what he considers to be the most original artist among his representative men would have been "impossible at an earlier time," and that the man of greatness "finds himself in the river of thoughts and events, forced onward by the ideas and necessities of his contemporaries. He stands where all the eyes of men look one way, and their hands all point in the direction in which he should go" (*W*, IV, 270, 190).

Even if Emerson would later admit in a more sombre mood in "Fate" that he was in fact "incompetent to solve the times" (*W*, VI, 3), I think that his writings nevertheless point to the difficult task of what it might mean to transcend time or history, to anticipate the new, to be able to talk, at least in fiction, about competing destinies and incommensurable worlds, thereby establishing an awareness of the unfulfilled potential and the hidden contradictions implicit in the age. Goethe and the other representative men in Emerson's illustrious group are therefore contemporaries in a double sense: on the one hand, they are necessarily the products of their time. On the other, they possess a sensorium that alerts them to that which is *con-temporary,* that is, belonging to different cultural temporalities 'layered' on top of each other in the present. And it is because they are responsive to this kind of ambivalence inherent in the present moment that they can hint at a future that would have been imperceptible without them. As Emerson states in a journal entry from the same year in which his collection of essays on "Representative Men" was written: "Be an opener of doors for such as come after thee and do not try to make the Universe a blind alley" (*J*, IX, 117).

Roughly at the same time, Karl Marx, in the last of his theses on Feuerbach, formulates a similar insight when he argues that "[d]ie Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*; es kommt aber darauf an, sie zu *verändern*" (Marx 1961: III, 535). Marx too imagines a sort of paradigm shift that does not stop at changing our interpretation of the world but continues to change the very facts or materialities of our lives. Marx envisions a reinterpretation of the world that itself becomes real, that effects a real metamorphosis of the world. Very much like Emerson, Marx knows about the difficulties of establishing a new paradigm and in his philosophy he can only account for it by introducing – *ex machina* – the class subject that functions as the harbinger of the revolution and, thus, the new age. But Marx here is influenced more strongly than is generally admitted by a nineteenth century language of heroic individualism that does not allow him to make an admission for forces of social change that are beyond a notion of the individualistic or beyond human agency.[41] Emerson's take on the subject seems to be less attuned to the realities of the nineteenth century than Marx's account, specifically because he ignores so many of the most pressing contemporary issues. But in his complex elaboration of the rhetorical structure implied by this transition, he is much more willing to allow for the difficulty or incalculability of the vanishing moment of historical change. He is interested in the vanishing moment of refiguration, of recoding, in what he terms "that indescribably small interval" (*W*, XII, 44) that occurs in-between two different accounts of the world and which

41 It was Louis Althusser who later framed this problem in Marx when he complemented his theory of revolutionary change with the important notion of "overdetermination," arguing that the moment of revolutionary change and the transition it effects can never be explained by recourse to a limited number of causes and agents only. See Althusser's "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (Althusser 2005).

cannot be attributed to singular human agents. His "representative men" must thus all expose or, to use Emerson's term, "abandon" themselves to forces larger than themselves.

The problem of *zwei Seelen* in Emerson is more generally also a problem to be located at the intersection of the fields of language and history. It is itself the symptom of a complex historicist double bind that sees history changing language changing history, etc. in an endless succession. Louis Montrose, in an altogether different context, has described this interlacing of text and history as a chiastic structure that exhibits both "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (Montrose 1989: 20). We thus find in Emerson poetry something that is both *geschichtsbedingt* and *geschichtemachend*, to use the terms that Brecht famously used in his reading of William Wordsworth's „She was a phantom of delight" in *Die Lyrik als Ausdruck*:

> „Lyrik ist niemals blosser Ausdruck. Die lyrische Rezeption ist eine Operation so gut wie etwa das Sehen oder Hören, d.h. viel mehr aktiv. Das Dichten muss als menschliche Tätigkeit angesehen werden, als gesellschaftliche Praxis mit aller Widersprüchlichkeit, Veränderlichkeit, als geschichtsbedingt und geschichtemachend." (Brecht 1988: 26, 418)

When Emerson's poetically reassesses the meaning of 'America,' then 'America' always has to be understood as an oxymoronic structure, that is, as essentially a poetic structure that simultaneously names and subverts the name and the speech act that brings 'America' into existence. I consequently want to read the characteristic doubleness of Emerson in his essays not merely as indicative of some kind of biographical indecision. It is a symptom of his sustained critical engagement with historicism and the question of America's place in history: a problem that can precisely not be resolved with recourse to the discourses of historicism and historical specificity, but only by an investigation of how history and 'America' mean, that is, by performing poetically or rhetorically the very discourses that express them.

Mikhail Bakthin has argued that periods of intense political or cultural struggle very often also express themselves in a complex literature (Bakhtin 1981: 418). While social historians have well documented the diverse social, economic and cultural developments finally culminating in the American Civil War, the complexity of the period's literature *as literature* has not received enough attention. The kind of historicist "de-transcendentalization" that Emerson has gone through in the last few decades, has tended to neglect the inherently literary or poetic quality and complexity of his writing. As a result, Emerson's politics have also often been dismissed as inconclusive or vague. But I think that political import of Emerson's writing lies precisely in its openness to a certain *poetic* undecidability, lies in its inability to resolve America's present fix or situation. But this does not make Emerson an apolitical author. As Barbara Johnson has argued in *A World of Difference*: "[T]he undecidable is the political. There is politics precisely because

there is undecidability" (Johnson 1987: 193). And Johnson insists correctly that poetry is the discourse in which this undecidability may be effectively investigated (Johnson 1987: 4).

This also explains Emerson's interest in individual and collective moments of danger in which the cultural possibility for change is always simultaneously the threat of complete cultural and individual disintegration. His symbolics of culture aims at developing ways of dealing with America's epochal turn, that first comes as a turning away from Europe and then as a turning away from itself. While European historicism is all about guaranteeing the smooth epochal transition by narrating and thus anticipating it, Emerson wants to expose the moment of the advent of the American age as a moment of risk in which, potentially, the meanings of 'America' are radically refigured. This is because he believes that despite America's radical Jacksonian programme of self-renewal, it is only a passing through the unbridled potentialities of the present that will lead to a potentially altogether different future. The ethical promise implied by the concept of 'America,' for Emerson can only be kept alive if Americans are willing to risk what they are for the unbridled possibilities that the present moment offers. The incalculability of individual life, of experience and, more importantly, of time in general, these for Emerson are the conduits through which 'America' or 'freedom' or 'democracy' can potentially be obtained. As he states in "The Over-Soul":

> "The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. In its experiments there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve. Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. The most exact calculator has no prescience that somewhat incalculable may not balk the very next moment. I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine." (*W*, II, 267)

Emerson knows that philosophy – or writing or poetry, for that matter – will never get at that "residuum it could not resolve". But he thinks that there needs to be a constant experimentation with the rhetorical forms that we use to talk about our contemporary experience. Just as Tocqueville who called for a new political science adequate to America's unprecedented political situation a decade earlier, Emerson thinks that the current phase of transition in America's history necessarily calls for new means of (self-)description. Just as Tocqueville or Channing, Emerson attempts to come up with a description of his time, but he takes a bigger leap than his contemporaries when he insists that we can only talk about the present if we attempt to make our modes of writing themselves correspond with the fluidity of American experience. Emerson's analysis of the American situation must therefore always also be seen as an attempt to develop new forms of writing somehow more adequate to America's transitional state. Emerson's sustained experimentation with American oratory is thus meant to give form to the immediacy of a present about to happen, on the "verge of to-day" (*W*, II, 315) as he phrases it. The

fluidity of Emerson's words is thus meant to correspond to a present that is itself a *heteroverse*, that is itself composed of shifting textures and materialities. Emerson's writing thus purports, as Jane Bennet has phrased it when talking about Thoreau's very similar writerly politics in *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild*, "an ideal that articulates the experience of being 'part and parcel' of one's surrounding even as those surroundings exceed full comprehension" (Bennett 1994: 59).

Again then, we find here that curious double bind or process of self-implication that I take to be the methodological principle of Emerson's essays: The world itself is of an eventfulness that spills over into the written text and its rhetorical or poetic procedures. But poetry or literature, precisely because its existence depends on a feature of rhetoricity, also produces or performs an eventfulness that spills over into the world. In *Nature*, Emerson will explicitly conceptualize this structure of a mutual implication as a more "radical correspondence" (*W*, I, 29; see also Chapter Four), but there are many other passages that highlight the very same structure. To provide just one example, from "Fate": "[I]n the history of the individual is always an account of his condition, and he knows himself to be party to his present estate" (*W*, VI, 13). And he continues to say that "[t]he secret of the world is the tie between person and event. Person makes event and event person. […] He thinks his fate alien, because the copula is hidden" (*W*, VI, 21).

America's sublation of history

What Emerson discovers in this structure of mutual implication is the conundrum of America's place in history. The discovery of this structure also means that America's place in history cannot be specified with recourse to standard historicist discourses. America's exceptionalism with regards to world history is, obviously, not only Emerson's theme.[42] For Emerson's Romantic role model Percy Bysshe Shelley, America is "a brighter Hellas" (Shelley 2002: 407) the utopian terrain where equality between men will be finally realized. For Locke, "in the beginning all the world was America" (Locke 1966: 145); according to Thomas Paine, America has the power "to begin the world anew" (Paine 1945: I, 21); and to Whitman, in the poem "Starting from Paumanok," America is the "world primal again" (Whitman 1959: 187). In these examples, America is the myth of a finding, a founding, a beginning, a grounding, a discovery. Emerson here takes a somewhat different stance in that he considers America's promise to lie in its future and not in its past. America for him is less a discovery than an invention. There is then, a fundamental difference to be grasped here: either America is the promised land discovered, a land that already fulfils the promise – the system of Puritan typology obviously was

42 For an overview of the history and ideology of "American exceptionalism" see Deborah Madsen's excellent *American Exceptionalism* (1998).

meant to secure this promise as one that had been fulfilled already –, or, as in Emerson's essays, it is a land that has yet to achieve its potential, a land that needs to become something qualitatively or fundamentally different from what it is today.

To further accentuate Emerson's position I want to turn to one of the most influential diagnoses of America's place in history. Roughly contemporary with Emerson's elaboration of his own position, it comes, again, as a sending from European philosophy. In his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Hegel presents the following account of America's place in history that on first sight seems to be similar to Emerson's position (America as a future promise):

> "Amerika ist somit das Land der Zukunft, in welchem sich in vor uns liegenden Zeiten, etwa im Streite von Nord- und Südamerika, die weltgeschichtliche Wichtigkeit offenbaren soll; es ist ein Land der Sehnsucht für alle die, welche die historische Rüstkammer des alten Europa langweilt. Napoleon soll gesagt haben: *Cette vieille Europe m'ennuie*. Amerika hat von dem Boden auszuscheiden, auf welchem sich bis heute die Weltgeschichte begab. Was bis jetzt sich hier ereignet, ist nur der Widerhall der Alten Welt und der Ausdruck fremder Lebendigkeit, und als ein Land der Zukunft geht es uns überhaupt hier nichts an. denn wir haben es nach der Seite der Geschichte mit dem zu tun, was gewesen ist, und mit dem, was ist, - in der Philosophie aber mit dem, was weder nur gewesen ist noch erst nur sein wird, sondern mit dem, was *ist* und ewig ist - mit der Vernunft, und damit haben wir zur Genüge zu tun." (*TWA*, XII, 86-87)

Emerson most probably had not read Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, delivered in Vienna in the years from 1822 to 1831 and published in 1837. But he had read Victor Cousin's summary account and interpretation of Hegel's lectures and would have been well aware of the chief implications of Hegel's radical reformulation of continental historicism. Also, even tough Hegel may have been the pre-eminent exponent of this new historicism, the emergence of the new dialectic had been prefigured by other authors that Emerson knew well. Goethe is here but one example.[43] In his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte,* Hegel comes up with a system for historicizing that will prove to be highly influential in European historicist thought since it suggests a model that connects the historical evolution of European nation states to a more general world-historical process. It is in this context of elaborating his new system of historicism that Hegel comes to speak of 'America' as an example. His description of 'America,' cited above, does not only propose the often-cited account of 'America' as land of the future. The passage and its context in Hegel deserve our attention because they are, I think, more problematic than is generally admitted.[44]

The passage as it has been read in American studies, is taken to suggest that 'America,' in its present state, is already the land of the future, and has thus realized the promise of the ages. Hegel's comments are thus often used to illustrate

43 On the emergence of historicism, see Friedrich Meinecke's classic study *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (1936).
44 See, for example, Walter Kaufmann's account of Hegel's myth of America as the land of the future in his *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (1966: esp. 4) or David Marr's in his *American Worlds Since Emerson* (1988: esp. 56-62).

a vision of a specifically American exceptionalism in which America leads other nations into a splendid future. However, if we look at the context of the passage in Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, it becomes clear that what he is actually saying is that America is not yet a nation and that it is very unlikely that it will become one in the near future. For Hegel, America does not stand for the future of nations, and it does not realize a future, progressive state of Spirit. Rather, the passage taken from the chapter "Geographische Grundlage der Weltgeschichte" (*TWA*, XII, 105-141) in his lectures is a collection of received resentments and stereotypes about the nature of the American soil and its people.

Speaking about the geographical conditions responsible for bringing about the accession of the nation state in Europe, Hegel comes to speak of the counter-example of 'America' and argues that the weakness of the American soil and physique had always prevented the forming of a native subject comparable to the subject of history present in Europe. In Hegel's words, America's culture is entirely 'natural,' and it is one "die untergehen musste, sowie der Geist sich ihr näherte. Physisch und geistig ohnmächtig hat sich Amerika immer gezeigt und zeigt sich noch so" (*TWA*, XII, 108). In order to mediate between the sturdy European subject newly arrived on the continent and the pity state of existence of the native American people, Hegel brings in the Negro: „Die Schwäche des amerikanischen Naturells war ein Hauptgrund dazu, die Neger nach Amerika zu bringen, um durch deren Kräfte die Arbeiten verrichten zu lassen" (*TWA,* XII, 108-9). And Hegel continues:

> „Da nun die ursprüngliche Nation geschwunden oder so gut wie geschwunden ist, so kommt die wirksame Bevölkerung meist von Europa her, und was in Amerika geschieht, geht von Europa aus. Europa warf seinen Überfluss nach Amerika hinüber […]." (*TWA,* XII, 109)

'America' thus figures as an excess, an *Überschuss*, it comes into being merely as an accumulation of the leftovers discarded from Europe's history. This obviously is hardly the America of the future that many commentators want to read into Hegel's famous passage. For Hegel, America does in no way qualify to be a nation, because it lacks the internal tension that would call for the constitution of a national structure.

> „Was nun das Politische in Nordamerika betrifft, so ist der allgemeine Zweck noch nicht als etwas Festes für sich gesetzt, und das Bedürfnis eines festen Zusammenhaltens ist noch nicht vorhanden, denn ein wirklicher Staat und eine wirkliche Staatsregierung entstehen nur, wenn bereits ein Unterschied der Stände da ist, wenn Reichtum und Armut sehr groß werden und ein solches Verhältnis eintritt, dass eine große Menge ihre Bedürfnisse nicht mehr auf eine Weise, wie sie es gewohnt ist, befriedigen kann. Aber Amerika geht dieser Spannung noch nicht entgegen, denn es hat unaufhörlich den Ausweg der Kolonisation in hohem Grade offen, und es strömen beständig eine Menge Menschen in die Ebenen des Mississippi. Durch dieses Mittel ist die Hauptquelle der Unzufriedenheit geschwunden […] Eine Vergleichung der nordamerikanischen Freistaaten mit europäischen Ländern ist daher unmöglich. (*TWA*, XII, 113)

America then lacks the characteristics of a proper nation and in Hegel's world-historical scenario, it does not even qualify for a comparison with the European nations with their long and complex history. Lacking any kind of historical orientation, 'America' is beyond comparison because it is not characterized by an overarching historical ambition but by an "Überwiegen des partikularen Interesses, das sich dem Allgemeinen nur zum Behufe des eigenen Genusses zuwendedt" (*TWA,* XII, 112). This, Hegel argues, explains the bad reputation of America's merchants (*TWA,* XII, 112) as well as the "ungebändigste Wildheit aller Einbildungen" (*TWA,* XII, 113) omnipresent Hegel's depiction of 'America'. Also, the abundance of the American space in his opinion destroys all tension that would be necessary to put the progressive self-realization of Spirit in progress. As Hegel remarks in an aside: "[H]ätten die Wälder Germaniens noch existiert, so wäre freilich die Französische Revolution nicht ins Leben getreten" (TWA, *XII*, 113).[45]

Hegel's is not the only commentary that disqualifies America in such a manner. We have already met another elitist (though generally more cheerful) European observer, Alexis de Tocqueville, who equally puzzles over what seems to him the incompatibility of individual freedom and equality in America. On the one hand, total equality suggests to him the danger of an atomistic society in which everyone lives in 'equal' anonymity and mediocrity. On the other hand, he sees in the extension of equality to all the threat of a tyranny of the many that would curfew the liberty of the individual. And, very much like in Hegel's commentary in "Geographische Grundlagen der Weltgeschichte," Tocqueville also argues that America's place in history is characteristically unconcretizable since its destiny, the success of its political system, has not yet been proven.

But while Tocqueville has a genuine interest in the political experiment of democracy, in Hegel's historicist project the example of America is included to denounce the existence of 'America' as a nation *per se*. America, he argues, lacks the internal tension that has brought about the nation state in Europe. Its utter mediocrity prevents the appearance of the dialectic of self-alienation and progressive concretization that he deems essential to the appearance of the nation state. This absence of tension, for Hegel, is tantamount to America's non-existence with regards to history. America is not, as he phrases it, part of "was *ist* und ewig ist." It is not something that can be talked about in terms of "being" or of

45 Hegel in his comments on America obviously blatantly underestimates the conflicts for land that had been a steady companion to early settlement. America was precisely *not* an uninhabited country. In Emerson's time, the plight of the Cherokee attracted sympathy (tough only among Andrew Jackson's opponents). In the 1830's, longstanding enclaves on legally established reservations were removed and Emerson writes a letter protesting the Cherokee's displacement from their ancestral lands to president Van Buren in 1838. But even in "progressive" New England, this sympathy did usually not extend to Indians who were in the way of regional settlements. For an account of the politics of race in post-revolutionary America, see John Wood Sweet's *Bodies Politic. Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (2003: esp. 398-474).

"existence".[46] America's constitution, Hegel argues, is only written, it is not *geäussert*, its state is not yet produced because the frontier functions as a continual deferral of the self-realization of its spirit.[47] Hegel is consequently less concerned with the America of the future as he is concerned with the America of today and its contradiction: it is at once a new land (the place where the very notion of the State seems to be replaced by the notion of democracy and its abolition of social classes) and an echo, repetition, quotation of something that was before (the Old World). The America of today is but a sublation of a tradition that has its proper place in the Old World. Its destiny is a self-overcoming, an abandoning of ground in favour of some new ground, but before this happens, it does not qualify for a comparison among nations. Until then, America is not merely the *Aufhebung* of history: it is its very cancellation.

Against this cancellation of America's place in history, we find in Emerson a complex maneuver that tries to locate America in terms of something that is not yet a dialectic, but only a weak force, namely the emerging potentiality of a present that both *is* and *is not*. Emerson's focus on the present's self-difference with itself – how it is both the ground we stand on as well as a "groundless ground" (*LL*, II, 279-280) that "slip[s] through our fingers then when we clutch hardest" (*W*, II, 49) – is meant to suggest a logos that is different from Hegel's dialectical model of history. If America, in Hegel's account, abandons or leaves the ground of History altogether – "Amerika hat von dem Boden auszuscheiden, auf welchem sich bis heute die Weltgeschichte begab" – and therefore cannot fulfil the ambition of *Geist* and *Freiheit*, then for Emerson America's promise lies precisely in its peculiar position *vis-à-vis* history: to live the idea of democracy for him means to come to terms with the irreducible contradiction of a moment "above time, in the present" (*W*, II, 67), that is, to come to terms with a cultural moment that is not reducible to the workings of a historical dialetics.

This Emersonian assessment of an America beyond time develops into a familiar topos in later qualifications of America. America, as Charles Olson has phrased it, for example, is always already "the second time" (Olson 1967: 113), a repetition, an echo of the Old World, both at the end of history as well as beyond all history. And because America is a cultural entity that does not result from the unfailing progression of a dialectic, it has to be procured poetically and thus also comes as a decisive semiological critique of every notion of history. If we follow Jacques Derrida, we can also read the poetic nature of America as an implicit critique of any notion of dialectics, because semiology precisely means the downfall of any

46 As Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner has pointed out in "Heideggers Amerika als Ursprungsort der Weltverdüsterung" (1997), this to Martin Heidegger was precisely America's quandary and the reason why he saw America – the nation as well as the concept – as the origin of a more general "Weltverdüsterung".

47 Hegel here argues in a sharp contrast against later American commentators who saw the frontier as the guarantee of America's self-renewal. See, for example, Frederick Jackson Turner's classic study on *The Frontier in American History* (Turner 1996).

dialectic (see Derrida 1976: 24-26): because America is a sign, because it is a semiological structure that cannot be reduced to a question of historical being, it is utterly nondialectical and counterhistorical. Precisely as an "Ausdruck fremder Lebendigkeit," to use Hegel's words *à contre-coeur*, precisely as an *Ausdruck* or *expression,* America is something not reducible to the workings of historical progress.

The anticipatory promise that 'America' names is not one that follows Hegel's logic of the dialectic. Emerson's perception of the present describes it as a transitory stage that is yet undecided and thus outruns the grammar of a dialectic. This is why the meaning of 'America' – as a nation and as a concept – is essentially and necessarily contradictory, internally split and continually submitted to reinterpretation. But precisely because it is itself implied in the poetic processes that produce it, 'America' exhibits, more generally, the semiological processes that bring about *all* history – something that Hegel cannot make explicit, as Derrida has shown, because he needs to suppress it in favour of the systematics of his genealogical (or dialectical) model.

Again then, we see here Emerson's interest in an adequate description of society's evolution as an incalculable process of accretion or as the accumulation of particulars rather than as the working out or revelation of a providential history. This is because for him the future of the idea of democracy cannot follow the law of the dialectic, it needs follows the law of chaos or entropy, a law of *non-difference* rather than that of the dialectic. The *Umschlag*, the step into the next epoch can only be attained by an "incalculable power" (*EL*, II, 9). This insight is even expressed in passages where Emerson chooses to talk about the historical process as an achievement of the individual:

> "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment. The great moments of history are the facilities of performance through the strength of ideas, as the works of genius and religion. 'A man,' said Oliver Cromwell, 'never rises so high as when he knows not whither he is going.' Dreams and drunkenness, the use of opium and alcohol are the semblance and counterfeit of this oracular genius, and hence their dangerous attraction for men. For the like reason they ask the aid of wild passions, as in gaming and war, to ape in some manner these flames and generosities of the heart." (*W*, I, 321-2)

Emerson's peculiar brand of historicist thought consequently identifies a black spot in Hegel's theory of the historical process, namely that liminal, intermediary state that cannot be described in terms of a logic of sublation, superimposition or cancellation, that in fact cannot be described in terms of a logic at all. Following Emerson, the present is the heterogeneous, factitious, or chaotic space through which American culture has to travel again and again. America thus exhibits the impossibility of the synthesis of the dialectic, precisely because its present and past

can always only incompletely be fusioned with its future: The attainment of its future requires a "crossing, or leaping," to use Cavell's words (Cavell 1992: 136), it requires the insertion of an incalculable poetic or semiological difference. This leap, this difference is then *not* a matter of soil or people, as Hegel wants to have it, but rather a question of *expression*, of *Audsruck*, or, to use Emerson's term, of *poetry*. If Emerson claims that it is only poetry, writing, or literature than can effect this leap, then he also argues for the defectiveness of the Hegelian sublation, since the synthesis ('America' in the future) here is not so much the addition of two parts ("Europe" and a more recent "American" past) but rather the partial destruction of both. America's "way onward" (*W*, II, 319) necessarily comes as a destruction of what it was before since it comes in the form of a transfiguration of the elements that go into it. Maybe we find here a reason why Goethe, among Emerson's collection of representative men, was the 'most' representative of his great idols: Goethe himself refused to organize the world into a system – "Goethe was the philosopher of this multiplicity; hundred-handed, Argus-eyed, able and happy to cope with this rolling miscellany of facts and sciences, and by his own versatility" (*W*, IV, 271). Emerson admires Goethe because he sees in him a knowledge that the role of chance cannot entirely be systematized if one does not simultaneously want to eradicate the potential of such a multiplicity. He thus concedes in his late years that he himself was "incompetent to solve the times" (*W*, VI, 3). While Hegel's dialectics finds its focal point precisely in describing the probable *Aufhebung* or sublation of history, Emerson believes that "true character appears not in heroic rebellion from society," as it would be typical of Hegel's *weltgeschichtliches Individuum*, "but in a stark and sufficient participation in society," as Stephen Whicher has argued (Whicher 1971: 131).

The idea of historiography and its critique is an important concern in many of Emerson's essays. However, I will argue in the following chapter that it is overridden by a focus on the *signification* of history, on how history is *read and written*. While Emerson's introduction of the sign into historicizing cuts against dialectical models, it more significantly exposes 'America' as an idea that calls for a continual "conversion of the world" (*W*, II, 115), for a repeated "transfiguration" (Cavell 2003: 9) or figural "invention" (Riddel 1995: 31-32). We thus begin to see more clearly in what ways 'America' functions, to again use Hegel's words *à contre coeur*, as an *Überschuss*: America is the "Abfall der Idee von sich selbst" (*TWA*, IX, 28), *it figures as its own refiguration*. In Emerson's essays this focus on the poetical or figurative nature of 'America' is intrinsically connected to the question of America's promise and potentiality in the present. The question of 'America' *here and now* is consequently combined with an ethical consideration of what it means to express 'America,' *here and now*. 'America's promise is underwritten by a radical principle of occasionality (*manifest* destiny), since its expression is always connected to the concrete materialitites of a "to-day." Emerson thus insists so

strongly on his own cultural moment because he knows that the production of 'America' cannot be adjourned, it cannot be left to future generations. America's promise precisely ask us to respond to it now, if it is to have any meaning, it needs to be continually actualized, it needs to be continually referred back to the occastion from which it results. This is not to say that Emerson expects America's „emphatic & universal calamity (*J*, IV, 241) to be resolved quickly and in the present age. The change he hopes for is both slower and more sustained, but it has to be started in the "present hour" (*W*, II, 66). He imagines a "revolution" that is, as he phrases it in "The American Scholar," "gradual," requiring us to locate the possibility of conversion not in some kind of ultimate support or 'ground,' but in a constant work on the idea of culture itself:

> "Men, such as they are, very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money, – the "spoils," so called, "of office." And why not? for they aspire to the highest, and this, in their sleep-walking, they dream is highest. Wake them and they shall quit the false good and leap to the true, and leave governments to clerks and desks. This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man. Here are the materials strewn along the ground. The private life of one man shall be a more illustrious monarchy, more formidable to its enemy, more sweet and serene in its influence to its friend, than any kingdom in history. For a man, rightly viewed, comprehendeth the particular natures of all men." (*W*, I, 107-8)

Two

The Scholar and the "Age of Introversion"

At some point in "The American Scholar," Emerson invokes Hamlet's conundrum to characterize the American scene:

> "Our age is bewailed as the age of Introversion. […] We, it seems, are critical; we are embarrassed with second thoughts; we cannot enjoy anything for hankering to know whereof the pleasure consists; we are lined with eyes; we see with our feet; the time is infected with Hamlet's unhappiness, 'Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.'" (*W*, I, 109)

Hamlet's unhappiness: that is the oppression of a past that sends its ghosts to haunt the present; it is the hypersensibility ("we are lined with eyes, we see with our feet") of the critical spirit that turns upon itself ("introversion") and dissolves certainties with "second thoughts"; it is the inability to simply renounce tradition or knowledge thought to be irrefutable; and, most importantly, Hamlet's case is exemplary for an experience located in the interval between past and future, for an existence in the eccentric temporality of a moment, that is, "out of joint," in the words of Hamlet's famous soliloquy. Just as Shakespeare characterizes Hamlet's eccentricity at the court of Elsinore – no longer a part of the inner circle of power at the court of Denmark –, so Emerson identifies the present state of America as one that cannot be brought to coherence with America's short but eventful history. Emerson's vision of the American *Zeitenwende*, of a moment that leaves the continuity and succession of the epochs, much like Shakespeare's two centuries earlier, consequently identifies a moment in the history of the nation that, with regards to the perceived continuity of America's history since its founding, is "out of joint," not yet made commensurate with a narrative of 'America'. And this being in the cleft, in-between times, haunted by the ghosts of the (European) past, looking into a yet unsecured (American) future, for Emerson, is where America finds itself in the present, torn between ultimately antagonistic destinies. Emerson's vision is one of an America that stands beside itself: in its present, in the way it *is*,

here and now, there is something fundamentally not or not yet reducible to the idea of 'America': *eine Welt aus den Fugen*.[1]

The reference to Hamlet's somber dream identifies one of Emerson's persistent concerns: How can America wake up to itself? And, how can it shed that "pale cast of thought," the dead weight of a European tradition that prevents America from waking up to itself, to its 'true' identity? If such an awakening is to take place, Emerson argues in "The American Scholar," then the scholar must first wake "to the time and to this country" (*W*, I, 108); that is, he must shift his attention to the concrete materialities and potentialities of an America 'here and now' instead of corroborating a tradition that once promised liberty but has now become, as Emerson expresses it in *Nature*, a "paper currency" (*W*, I, 30).

Emerson identifies the epochal turn even more explicitely when he states that he "look[s] upon the discontent of the literary class as a mere announcement of the fact, that they find themselves not in the state of mind of their fathers" (*W*, I, 109). And using the metaphor of "learning to swim" – that in Emerson always stands for a certain epistemological daring, for the danger of thinking – he argues that just "as a boy dreads the water before he has learned that he can swim" (*W*, I, 110) the literary class "regret the coming state as untried" (*W*, I, 110). For Emerson, however, this daring, this confrontation with a cultural space and moment that is in-between, untried but full of possibilities, is exactly the ambivalence implied by America's contemporary situation. In the following, I want to read "The American Scholar" not primarily as providing a portrait of the ideal scholar but, rather, I want to focus on how Emerson here provides an account of this temporality of a vanishing moment of the present and the cultural opening that it (potentially) presents.

Emerson's qualification of his time in "The American Scholar" – reminding us of the problem of double consciousness examined in Chapter One – acknowledges the essential ambivalence of a present in-between the times, undecided between "historic glories" and the "rich possibilities" of an approaching age:

> "If there is any period one would desire to be born in, – is it not the age of Revolution; when the old and the new stand side by side, and admit of being compared; when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope; when the historic glories of the old can be compensated by the rich possibilities of the new era? This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it." (*W*, I, 110)

It is because of cheerful passages like this one that Oliver Wendell Holmes has called "The American Scholar" "our intellectual Declaration of Independence" (qtd. in Garnett 1888). Holmes suggests that while America had already attained

1 I am using Heidegger's German translation of Hamlet's words here because it lets me hint at yet another narrative of a peculiar trans-atlantic translation from Shakespeare to Emerson to Nietzsche to Heidegger and, finally, to Derrida, who in his essay "The Time is Out of Joint" has talked at length about Nietzsche and Heidegger's reception of Hamlet's conundrum of a "time ouf of joint". The same essay also links the question of "eine Welt aus den Fugen" to the question of the meaning of 'America' in and for deconstruction (Derrida 1995).

economical independence for a few decades, its intellectual independence still had to be asserted. Holmes' assertion subsequently became a commonplace in American studies and Emerson's address was taken to have laid the foundation for a literature that was natively 'American'.

There is, however, a more sinister subtext to Emerson's cheerful and optimistic outlook for the American nation and a problematization of the simple origin precisely in the text in which Holmes sees it posited: Emerson's caveat "if we but know what to do with it" alerts us to the possibility that the revolutionary present, in its absolute unpredictability and unprecedentedness, may hold futures that are not commensurable with each other. The revolutionary present is characterized not so much by either "fear" or "hope," but, rather, by the *con*-temporariness of these conflicting sentiments. What if, Emerson suggests, these conflicting histories will not finally be resolved to provide a common trajectory for what, already in Emerson's time, was a diversity of American cultures? What if we do not know what to do with the possibilities of the new era? What if the "rich possibilities of the new era" will not present themselves because we will not let them happen as something that is unprecedented, not prefigured by our cultural legacy? Again, we encounter Emerson's peculiarly ambidextrous attitude towards his time: on the one hand, we have his certain sense that change is imminent but, on the other, his inability or, rather, unwillingness to specify America's future. In the spirit of its Shakespearean motto, Emerson in "The American Scholar" is deeply aware both of his own eccentricity – belonging neither clearly to the "Party of the Past" nor to the "Party of the Future" – but also of something that one could term the irreversibility of history, namely that the past cannot be changed. And Emerson here chooses to define America or the cultural concept of 'America' – if they are not the same thing – in precisely these terms of eccentricity and irreversibility:

> "Perhaps the time is already come, when it ought to be, and will be something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." (*W*, I, 81)

Again: Emerson does here not so much cash the check of America's final cultural liberation than assert his predication of America's transitional state before any such liberation, in-between epochs. It is important to note that what Emerson promises here is not the actual existence of an 'American literature,' or even that of an "American Scholar", rather, he significantly prefers to talk about the "postponed expectation" (*W*, I, 81) of such a literature and of 'America' in general. The particular temporality of this "postponed expectation" is again one that consists of a simultaneous *progress* – the expectation of a different world – and *regress* – the continual postponement of this expectation. Both 'America' and 'American literature' or 'American writing' are therefore in Emerson not yet the terms representing a

particular kind of literature or a particular kind of nation. Rather: they are empty containers that have yet to be filled, that have yet to be fully realized.

After all, it is a strange declaration of independence that decrees that the past state still has a hold on us. For Emerson – as I have already argued in the previous chapter – America's full-blown industrialization and the rampant remaking of America that came with it does not yet amount to more than just a more proficient "exertion of mechanical skill." America is still "learning from other lands," or worse, it is no more than an "apprentice" to the "learning of other lands." The difficulty that Emerson confronts and does not want to dismiss light-heartedly, is how to bring about something new, how to address an expectation (a 'promise', a 'declaration') without taking its realization for granted. And this is why Emerson's description of 'America' – as a nation *and* a concept – cannot be phrased as a statement of facts – specifying America's achievements up to the present moment – but, rather, it has to be expressed in the linguistic form of the "ought." Phrased, much like Hamlet's suspended imperative to revenge, as a "resisted imperative," to use Geoffrey Harpham's phrase (Harpham 1992: 2). And very much like Hamlet's discontent, America's "unhappiness" results from the dilemma of wanting to commit oneself to action or to reform when one does not really know from which grounds to start from in the first place.

The contradictory sentiments of a continually postponed expectation and a reluctance to act also determines Emerson's "double consciousness" between conservative and radical agendas, as we have seen in Chapter One. His adherence to the *here and now* is not reducible to a politics because it pertains to a moment that is both within and beyond time, irreducible to a linear workings of history. Emerson defines America's place precisely in this eccentricity, in this moment evacuated from historical time. He thus means to establish an understanding of America's idiosyncrasy as a nation both within and outside its own history, both within and outside the history of the world. Other than some of his fellow Transcendentalists who attempted to reform their lifes according to various more or less esoteric reform plans, Emerson insists that we have yet to see a much more fundamental change, namely that of the ways and means by which America expresses itself. He agrees that America's change in the present is urgent and incisive, but he contends that if this is also to be a change of Americans themselves, there will have to be a reformation also of the poetic means by way of which Americans express themselves. As he remarks in "The American Scholar": "The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the mere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in a new age[…]?" (*W*, I, 82). While reform agendas in Jacksonian America often had a patent plan of how to change America, Emerson thinks that the consequences of America's remaking are as yet inscrutable and not easily assimilable to particular

agendas of reform. He is convinced that we cannot simply control historical change and that our interventions may produce results that are themselves completely 'incalculable'.

> "I have been floated into this thought, this hour, this connection of events, by secret currents of might and mind, and my ingenuity and wilfulness have not thwarted, have not aided to an appreciable degree." (*W*, II, 328)

To confront the risk implied by historical change consequently means to wilfully accept that real change is not reducible to an agenda of reform but necessarily comes as something that is "incalculable […], unforeseen, unimaginable" (*W*, II, 328). And even if Emerson means this description to describe every individual's walk of life, it also applies to the development of the nation, since he believes that America's democratic promise of change can never be reduced to the programme of this or that reform politics. "Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves": if we return to the passage from "The American Scholar," we can see that Emerson here inscribes the unforeseeability of America's future already in poetic terms, that is, as the failure of a national aesthetics. And Emerson's remarks here are a provocative departure from the standards ways in which the topic of America's national literature would have been presented in earlier years for the Phi Beta Kappa orations at Harvard. Emerson, too, insists that an American "poetry" will enable the transition into the next age, but what he terms "poetry" is precisely not the national aesthetics that had previously been chosen as a topic for the talks at the Society. On the contrary: Refusing to specify that which is 'American' in American literature, Emerson identifies a poetic *Eigensinn* at the heart of an American literature yet to be achieved. He insists on something that will not be domesticated by an elite of intellectuals and their call for a programmatically American literature. America's "events" and "actions" – though they will no doubt later be made the objects of literary descriptions –, "will *sing themselves*," as he phrases it. Still, Emerson's intimation of a failure of a national aesthetics for America's present moment is of course nothing less than another inscription, a definition, and a characterization of an 'American literature,' if only in inverted commas. Paradoxically enough, then, the 'father' of American thought and literature is also the first person who rejects the notion and concept of American thought and literature *per se*, but "thereby in the same gesture defining it: as a double inscription," as Joseph Riddel has argued (Riddel 1995: 42). Emerson's complication of historicist discourse, his refutation of earlier descriptions of 'America' thus also comes as a decisive change to what Sacvan Bercovitch has called "the symbolic construction of America" (Bercovitch 1993). It reconceives of 'America' as a poetic idea that is essentially linked to a continual process of poetic revision or refiguration rather than to the institution of an authoritative national literature or culture.

In "The American Scholar," Emerson most pronouncedly argues for such a reconstruction of 'America' as a poetic or symbolic construct. "The American Scholar" is given in August of the panic year 1837 and Emerson here elucidates the activity of the scholar with regards to the present situation of America (he will do so again in "Literary Ethics"). America, so Emerson's perception, has been hugely successful politically and economically, but it has failed to come up with a national culture and forms of expression that would adequately articulate the American experience. Because of this failure, scholars, writers, etc. must still express themselves by imitating the thought and art of the Old World.

Barbara Packer has argued, that this non-existence of a specifically American art and thought was a surprise for both Europeans and Americans:

> "[O]ne of the reasons for the interest English writers of the era had taken in America's possible cultural flowering lay in their fear that the genius of English literature had exhausted itself in the mother country, and that a new Renaissance, if it ever occurred would need virgin soil. But by the 1830s it had become apparent that the predictions of the cultural historians had been wrong on both counts: the arts had not taken root in America, and in England they had gloriously revived." (Packer 1982: 103).

America's failure to inaugurate a national literature was a disappointment on both sides of the Atlantic. Obviously, other cultural hopes were connected to America's taking of the virgin land. Its expression in a new national literature would have served as an authentication of America's claim to a different, more specifically democratic culture. When the continental literary conjunction went through a significant decline in the late eighteenth century, Europeans had closely followed the development of a republic of letters on the other side of the Atlantic, hoping that the new nation would come up with a similarly new culture. Instead, American authors found themselves struggling with the legacy of the traditions of the Old World. The writer's fear that the burden of the past would be so great that it would prevent him from making his own stand, is obviously not a peculiarly American conundrum. But since America had defined itself as a republic of letters in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the non-existence of an American national literature came as a disappointment to many observers.

At times, Emerson accepts this gloomy faith and identifies with what he would later describe as the characteristic situation of every American writer, namely that he was „late in the World too late perchance for fame" (*J*, II, 244). The writer, or scholar, or poet in Emerson is a marginal figure: As someone who has always already come too late, he is also eccentric with regards to the historical progress that is taking place. He has no hand in it and cannot enable the transition from the past to the future. As Emerson says in "Prudence": "There is a certain fatal dislocation in our relation to nature" (*W*, II, 230). For Emerson, human nature is, by definition, eccentric and he repeatedly returns to the figure of Nicolaus Copernicus to more generally conceptualize the human as something that has been displaced from the centre (see, for example, *W*, VII, 223). The writer's

eccentricity, more specifically, results from what Emerson calls the "great influence" of "the mind of the Past" (*W*, I, 87). This indelible influence of the past stands in a sharp contrast to Emerson's call for the scholar to wake "to the time and to this country" (W, I, 108).

Ideally, then, the notion of 'America' in Emerson stands for the possibility to throw off what he calls, quoting from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the old "cast of thought" (*W*, I, 109). But in order to throw off this cast, to overcome America's fixation with its own and with the European past, the writer needs to recognize that the present, in itself, holds conflicting potentials. The writer thus needs to acknowledge the present moment as undecided, as an "age of Revolution," as Emerson expresses it, "when the energies of all men are searched by fear and by hope" (*W*, I, 110). It is only by opening and confronting such a cultural "verge" (W, II, 315) or "abyss of possibility" (*W*, I, 205) in which the hold of the past tradition is loosened, that we can potentially find a new expression of 'America.' Consequently, in order to articulate a new 'America,' old expressions of and preconceptions about 'America' need to be disarticulated; what has sedimented into an organic but finally authoritarian totality of culture needs to be upset so that America can live up to its democratic promise of freedom, so that its "song" can be sung. This disarticulation of 'America,' as Emerson conceives of it, comes as a disclaiming of the very tropological system that posits the object and ideology that is 'America'. The aim of this disarticulation is the reconfiguration and refiguration of the terms that originally went into the 'making' of 'America,' and it is precisely this process of a tropological re-turning of the terms that signify America that can alone guarantee the advent of its future.[2]

The "casualty" of the ordinary

As Emerson argues in "The American Scholar," it is precisely the task of the scholar to ensure the attention to the present moment as an undecided, transitory phase of culture. To enable the advent of the future, the scholar needs to explore "the near, the low, the common" (*W*, I, 110), that is, he needs to focus on the present terms of America's emergence as a democracy rather than on the tradition that it inherits. If the scholar lives up to America's promise, he does so not by trying to bring America's infant culture on a par with European traditions. He lives up to America's promise precisely by advocating the ordinary cultural material in the present around him: "Give me insight into to-day and you may have the antique and future worlds" (*W*, I, 111). The scholar thus functions as an agent who can only initiate a process that can then no longer be controlled in terms of artistic genius.

2 The notion of disarticulation is Paul de Man's, for a definition see his essay "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" in (De Man 1996: 90).

Again, this is because an attention to America's present moment "may" provide us with a different future, but the advent of that future itself is incalculable. Emerson ideal is then not simply that of an unhindered vision of America, of an America whose present is exhaustively present to itself. Like other American authors, he complicates this dream of an unmediated "democratic vista" by insisting that the moment, in which America will fully live up to its promise, will be continually adjourned. For Emerson too, 'America' is like Gatsby's "single green light" (Fitzgerald 1998: 20) that always recedes from view, because the unhindered view of "the near, the low, the common" (*W*, I, 110) is inevitably already bound up with a tropic economy that transgresses the myth of things.[3]

Emerson does not believe that America can simply leave the "historische Rüstkammer des alten Europa" (*TWA*, XII, 114), as Hegel suggests in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*. Even the American writer begins his venture in the tradition out of which he is supposed to effect the new novel, writing, song. But Emerson believes that a tropical reconfiguration, a refiguration of received discourses is possible if we confront them with the yet 'unhistoricised,' contradictory potential of the present moment. He is well aware, however, that such a refiguration of the discourse that went into the making of the American republic of letters, may be a dangerous undertaking. The effects that such an attention to "the near, the low, the common" may have, is, in Emerson words, "incalculable" (*W*, II, 268). It may bring about the new language that potentially expresses 'America,' but the precise moment of the *turning* or *troping* of the old language into the new cannot be predicted, cannot be 'planned' as a matter of a national aesthetics.

Emerson's interest in the ordinary material of everyday life is consequently not meant to suggest that it may function as a stable ground for a new foundation of America. For him and other Transcendentalists, the ordinary always exhibits a „mysterious indeterminacy," as Thomas L. Dumm has phrased it (Dumm 1999: 2). Or, as Emerson says in "Experience," it precisely "slip[s] through our fingers then when we clutch hardest" (*W*, III, 49). The success of an American *pursuit of happiness* is thus continually postponed because the ordinary, everyday ways of our lives can never be brought into complete coordination with our dreams, visions, etc. This is why the fulfilment of this desire necessarily addresses a "postponed expectation," it orients itself towards a receding horizon, towards what Emerson calls "this new yet unapproachable America" (*W*, III, 72). Emerson's

3 Even in Walt Whitman's more assuringly phrased formulation of a "democratic vista," the outlook onto the future state of America is projected from a present moment that lets us only hazily see the outline of the coming democray. As Whitman has it: "America, filling the present with greatest deeds and problems, cheerfully accepting the past, including feudalism, … counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, … almost entirely on the future. Nor is that hope unwarranted. To-day, ahead, though dimly yet, we see, in vistas, a copious, sane, gigantic offspring. For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come" (Whitman 2002: 757).

phrase also aptly describes how the moment of our ordinary present always already comes as the disappointment of an American promise of happiness. The American literature of two centuries has repeatedly returned to this disappointment of a promise of an 'approachable America' and has shown that this disappointment is, too, a constitutive element of the ideology of the American dream.[4] The happiness envisioned by this dream is thus one that appears where it had been overlooked, it is a happiness that has a fleeting existence in the everyday and that cannot be achieved by a planned *pursuit*. The danger is consequently one of sentimentalizing the ordinary as the unproblematic ground for individual and communal biographies.

My focus here is thus not on the kind of 'commonsensical ordinary' that forms the substance of liberal democracy and its democratic promise.[5] Also, I am not concerned with the unproblematic everyday that the theorists of liberalism must posit as the foundation for their rational actors. I think that the relation of the ordinary and the practices of American society is much more problematic. As Thomas L. Dumm argues:

> "Constantly threatened by the habits it sustains, the ordinary might be said to (con)front the forces of its diminishment [...] The ordinary has been approached in relationship to a transcendentalist vision of nature, discussed as a front of the wild we mortals supposedly revere. It has cautiously been apprehended as a font of common meaning, an immeasurable measure of common sense, unerring because it has no fixed point that might subject it to refutation, frustrating to think about for the same reason; confused with the sites that surround and yet never contain it; an aspect of language, yes, but not yet or ever synonymous with language; infinite in aspect, resistant to totality." (Dumm 1999: 3-4)

Seen from this perspective, the ordinary is a paradoxical formation that is always both near and far, both present and absent. It is an ordinary that political theory has always struggled with because it comes as a danger to the autonomy of individual actors and because it troubles the notion of an intentionally plannable, pragmatist agency. The ordinary I am interested in here precisely resists its intentional organization, even if we must still presuppose it as a context of human life. As a consequence, the ordinary is never an originary culture, rather, it is comparable to what Michel de Certeau has called the "cultural activity" of the everyday. According to de Certeau, the everyday is the „cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable and unsymbolized" (Certeau 1984: xvii). And according to de Certeau, this cultural activity cannot easily be narrated in the terms of the predominant ideologies or discourses of a culture. The ordinary – as a culture that is lived and experienced

4 For a similar account of the disappointment inherent in the American dream, see Elisabeth Bronfen, "Der 'American Dream': Versprechen und Katastrophe eines Begriffs" (Bronfen 2007).

5 On the complex relation of „common sense" and the „ordinary," see Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (Deleuze 1994: 31-37).

but that cannot be symbolized or represented – always contains an ambivalent kernel that is not objectifiable. Because it resists its integration into a (national) narrative, the relation of fields of ordinary, everyday practices and explicit, narrated accounts of (a national) culture must necessarily remain ambivalent too.[6]

Cavell has similarly described this phenomenon of the "moving ground" of the everyday as the "uncanniness of the ordinary" (Cavell 1988). Following Cavell, modernity has come up with two different reactions to the ambivalent structure of the ordinary: on the one hand, skepticism imagines the disappearance of the world, it assumes that I can never trust the ordinary that surrounds us as a 'world'. On the other, modernity has maintained a naïve belief in the presence of things, assuming that the things and our perceptions of them coincide. Cavell argues that both reactions lead to a dead end since the world –this is the fundamental insight that Cavell discovers in Wittgenstein and in an analytic philosophy in the footsteps of Austin – is never simply present or absent, but always both present and absent at the same time (Cavell 2002: 238-265).

According to Cavell, what Wittgenstein discovers when his philosophy moves towards skepticism, is paradoxically precisely the ordinary, the everyday. Scepticism thus leads to a discovery of precisely what it wants to repudiate:

> "I might epitomize Wittgenstein's originality in this regard by saying that he takes the drift toward skepticism as the discovery of the everyday, a discovery of exactly what it is that skepticism would deny. It turns out to be something that the very impulse to philosophy, the impulse to take thought about our lives, inherently seeks to deny, as if what philosophy is dissatisfied by is inherently the everyday." (Cavell 1988: 170)

As a consequence, Cavell argues that we can only aspire towards the ordinary, but that it will never be available to us as a mere presence. We have always already lost it: "The everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appears to us as lost to us" (Cavell 1988: 171). And if we finally, following our skepticist questioning of the reality of things, accept the ordinary as a 'world,' then this world carries within itself the memory of this doubt as an irreconcilable ambivalence:

> "The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of a return means that what returns after scepticism is never (just) the same." (Cavell 1988: 166)

It is precisely this double structure – Emerson calls it our "fatal dislocation" (*W*, II, 230) – of the ordinary that becomes a focal point in Emerson's attempt to assess America's present moment. For him, America is something that has been firmly established on the one hand, but is characterized by a certain potential, possibility, or promise (of freedom, of democracy, etc.) not yet achieved in the present. I

6 On the concept of a problematic, ambivalent everyday, see Catherine Driscoll's "The Moving Ground: Locating Everyday Life" (Driscoll 2001), Henry Lefebvre's *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (Lefebvre 1984), and Lois McNay's "Michel de Certeau and the Ambivalent Everyday" (McNay 1996).

think Cavell's notion of the ordinary can help to explain the characteristic doubling of the present moment in Emerson, because it links the question of the 'uncanniness' of the ordinary with an investigation of the ways in which we mean with language. Cavell argues that even ordinary language is prone to repudiate itself, that it may lose its power to express or "word the world":

> "[F]or me the uncanniness of the ordinary is epitomized by the possibility or threat of what philosophy has called skepticism, understood (as in my studies of Austin and of the later Wittgenstein I have come to understand it) as the capacity even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by. [...] I might describe my philosophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic." (Cavell 1988: 154)

The example that Cavell provides to illustrate the characteristic doubleness of the ordinary is that of the letter in Edgar Allen Poe's story on "The Purloined Letter" – itself obviously an exemplary case when it comes to explaining all things American. The everyday or ordinary, Cavell argues, follows the same logic as the famous letter in Poe's story: it remains undiscovered precisely because it is readily accessible. Cavell thus reads "The Purloined Letter" as a parable on the guessing game that we know as „odd and even" and that asks us to decide whether something has taken its ordinary course ("even") or whether something remarkable ("odd") has happened. As Cavell notes: „[I]t [the letter] is also to be read as the work of one who opposes me, challenges me to guess whether each of its events is odd or even, everyday or remarkable, ordinary or out of the ordinary." (Cavell 1988: 168))

The connection that Cavell establishes between the ordinary and the problem of skepticism can also be referred back to what I have been saying about the peculiar temporal quality of the present, the contemporary: the present too is characterized by a fundamental ambivalence, it is never entirely present or absent. The present and the ordinary share the peculiar logic of something that is either an absent presence or a present absence. The temporal space of the present thus becomes a prototype of a *third space*, in which things are undoubtedly present, but can never be entirely localized or categorized.

Cavell calls for a sustained philosophical investigation of the ordinary and its ambivalence. Even if the association of human agency and the ordinary is problematic – since the indeterminacy of the ordinary makes it a kind of quicksand –, Cavell sees a necessity of establishing a relation to the ordinary, "since there is nothing beyond the succession of each and every day; and grasping a day, accepting the everyday, the ordinary, is not a given but a task" (Cavell 1988: 171). To establish such a relation to the ordinary, Cavell pleads for what he calls *acknowledging*: acknowledging comes as a continual approximation of the present,

as a working out of its ambivalences without attempting to integrate them directly into the paradigms or the *knowledge* of a culture.

In later studies and essays, Cavell shows how what Wittgenstein discovers in the *Gewöhnliches* can also be seen at work in an American tradition of thought that has it most prominent exponents in Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. And Cavell repeatedly quotes a passage from Thoreau's Walden to illustrate this process of *acknowledging*: "Not till we are lost [or turned around], in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (Thoreau 1966: 162). Cavell insists that such an *acknowledgment* of the irreducible diversity of the present both in temporal and cultural terms can never be translated into authoritative social practices or into a comprehensive *knowledge* or narration of how things 'really' are. But such a responsiveness to the unacknowledged potential of the present moment, by exposing resistances within the hegemonious practices of the present, can disperse the sedimented structures of our cultures to enable new cultural articulations. And this is why for Cavell, *acknowledging* becomes the paradigmatic sign for a specifically 'American' ethos of democracy.[7]

In Emerson, an attention to the unavowed and ambivalent potential of the present is tantamount to achieving America's democratic promise. But to expose oneself to the ambivalence of the ordinary for him also means to more specifically confront a profound risk. As he explains in a note in his journal in 1833:

> "Such is the inaction of men. We have an obscure consciousness of our attributes. We stand on the edge of all that is great, yet are restrained in inactivity and unconscious of our powers, like neuters of the hive, every one of which is capable of transformation into the Queen bee. We are always on the brink, etc. Much preparation, little fruit. But suddenly in any place, in the street, in the chamber, will the heavens open and the regions of wisdom be uncovered, as if to show how thin the veil, how null the circumstances. As quickly, a Lethean stream washes through us and bereaves us of ourselves. What a benefit if a rule could be given whereby the mind, dreaming amid the gross fogs of matter, could at any moment CAST ITSELF and FIND THE SUN! But the common life is an endless succession of phantasms; and long after we have deemed ourselves recovered and sound, light breaks in upon us and we find we have yet had no sane hour. Another morn rises on mid-noon." (*J*, V, 239-240)

Our consciousness of our position in the world, as Emerson argues, is "obscure" and it may not provide sufficient grounds upon which to enact that transition to "all that is great". Even if the distance between our ordinary existence in the present and the achievement of our promise (as an individual, as a culture) is only minimal ("a thin veil") the "rule" of this transition cannot be given, its advent precisely eludes our grasp, so that we can only remain always "on the brink". The risk that Emerson frames here as inherent to the ordinary is what Cavell is interested in

7 On the notion of "acknowledging" and how it is conceived as an alternative to "knowledge", see (Cavell 2002: 238-66).

when he alerts us to the common or the ordinary as something that happens "casually" but may sometimes cause a "casualty":

> "What seems to be signature in Emerson is the weight he puts on the obvious, where the difficulty is taking him at his word. A favorite instance of mine is his liking for the connection between something happening casually and something creating a casualty. He is, in effect, calling attention to a point that language is making for us on its surface, namely, that what we do casually, every day, unthinkingly, distractedly – the hierarchies we assume, the slights we deliver and suffer, our adaptations (Emerson calls it our conformity) to the unconscionable – are as permanent in their effects, as matters of life and death, as are catastrophes." (Cavell 2003: 6)[8]

To "take Emerson at this word," as Cavell phrases it, would mean to not just pay attention to the ordinary, to the unorganized, unhistoricised materials of our lives. It would mean, more specifically, to pay attention to how the ordinary in Emerson, as "a point that language is making for us on its surface," is intrinsically connected to the promise and danger of writing. Cavell reminds us that Emerson's call to action, then, is first and foremost a call for modes of writing that become attentive of the present moment as the stage upon which both individual as well as communal development is enacted. But this move does not secure the ground, since it is precisely in our use of language that we become aware of the "casualty" of the ordinary. On the one hand, then, we see here yet another echo of Emerson's religious training because for him, as Gouldner expresses it, the "reconceptualization of the social moment had the appeal of a secular religion, with the convert reoriented toward communal life, animated by a new sense of values, possessed of a new cultural language, and committed to new actional ends" (Gouldner 1976: 47). On the other hand, however, it is important to maintain that Emerson frames the problem of America's 'conversion,' of its transition to the next age as a matter of working through prior designations in order to expose them to a process of rhetorics, of *troping* and *refiguration*.

From "calculation" to "force"

In terms of the American historicist impulse that I have outlined in Chapter One, it becomes obvious that Emerson, even in the early lectures on the "Present Age," is not so much concerned with specifying America's place in history, about historicizing America's current state within a larger history of nations, but rather interested in what one could term, with Raymond Williams, the "emergent forces" (Williams 1977:123) of cultural change.[9] For Emerson, America's transition is

8 For a similar comment on the potential casualty of the cause, see also Cavell's "Excerpts from Memory"(Cavell 2006: 790).

9 In his *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams has described how any historical epoch is founded upon an interplay of "dominant," "residual," and "emergent" forces; see (Williams 1977: 123).

simultaneously both about its rampant commerce as well as about its spiritual renewal. Both contribute to the feeling that America is "on the verge" (W, VIII, 338) of something to come. And both Emerson and Whitman hope that the activity of the scholar and writer would enable the advent of a qualitatively entirely different future.

While it signalled America's advent as a world power, commerce had led, as Emerson argues in "The American Scholar", merely to a culture of "second thoughts" (*W*, I, 109). Earlier, in the lectures on "The Present Age", he complains that commerce has established a general spirit of "calculation" (*EL*, III, 199) and had weakened all communal "ties and ligaments" (*EL*, III, 189) that were characteristic of America's culture in the past. This definition of the present age sets the scholar's epochal task: "Born in an age of calculation and criticism we are to carry it with all its triumphs and yield it captive to Universal Reason" (*EL*, III, 199).

Emerson's redefinition of the scholar thus suggest, in its own rather peculiar way, a healing of the conflict between individualism and the principles of market economy: "Whilst the multitude of men degrade each other, and give currency to desponding doctrines," Emerson argues, "the scholar must be a bringer of hope, and must reinforce man against himself" (*W*, I, 193). But to "reinforce man against himself" means to effectively come up with "a new set of distinctions," and "a new order of ideas" that will "set a bound to the respectability of wealth, and a bound to the pretensions of the law and the church" (*W*, I, 194). And this impetus, as Emerson argues provocatively, cannot be simply delegated to the scholar:

> "Nothing solid is secure; everything tilts and rocks. Even the scholar is not safe; he too is searched and revised. Is his learning dead? Is he living in his memory? The power of mind is not mortification, but life. But come forth, thou curious child! hither, thou loving, all-hoping poet! hither, thou tender, doubting heart, which hast not yet found any place in the world's market fit for thee; any wares which thou couldst buy or sell, – so large is thy love and ambition, – thine and not theirs is the hour. Smooth thy brow, and hope and love on, for the kind Heaven justifies thee, and the whole world feels that thou art in the right." (W, I, 193-94)

If America wants to overcome its fixation with the market, Emerson argues, it will have to trust its scholars and writers because they are the ones that have access to that which escapes the market's spirit of "calculation". And even if the scholars cannot be instrumentalised – because they are themselves "not safe" –, Emerson insists on the centrality of a "force" or a "power" that resists its integration into the system of an all-encompassing market economy. The advent of America's epochal turn precisely hinges on its readiness to let its "curious children" and "all-hoping poets" come forth to radically refigure the prevailing doctrine of ideas and to again establish "a life of discovery and performance" (*W*, I, 221).

America's 'healing,' the advent of its glorious age, consequently depends upon a "sublime prudence" that, for Emerson, is the general sign of the human as well as

a specific quality of what he terms "genius" or "character". As he explains in "Man the Reformer":

> "There is a sublime prudence, which is the very highest that we know of man, which, believing in a vast future, – sure of more to come than is yet seen, – postpones always the present hour to the whole life; postpones talent to genius, and special results to character. As the merchant gladly takes money from his income to add to his capital, so is the great man very willing to lose particular powers and talents, so that he gain in the elevation of his life." (*W*, I, 256)

The sacrifice of giving up the past is thus outweighed by a promise: The scholar's willingness to refute the comfort of old traditions and to "believe in a vast future" can potentially be "the conversion of our harvest into seed" (*W*, I, 256), as he phrases it in "Man the Reformer". The figure of the scholar or the reformer thus announces an age "when we too shall hold nothing back, but shall eagerly convert more than we now possess into means and powers, when we shall be willing to sow the sun and the moon for seeds" (*W*, I, 256). We see here, consequently, a concrete instance of Emerson's signature 'refigurative' procedure: the process that he describes – America's transition into the future, the advent of a new age of American thought, of a "vast future" – is also signalled by a refiguration of the terms that went to signify the notion of 'America' – "wares," "buy," "sell," "possess". America's transition is therefore no longer a matter merely of programmatic reform, it is found out to be a poetic or rhetoric challenge. Precisely because the scholar (the writer, the poet) expresses himself in words, he is, Emerson believes, the true harbinger of the age to come. He is a kind of *Spielleiter* of the epochal turn, because he alone is capable of poetically arranging the conflicting potentialities inherent in the contemporary. As he expresses it in an early lecture:

> "He who shall represent the genius of his day; he who shall, standing in this great cleft of Past and Future, understand the dignity and power of his position so well as to write the laws of Criticism, of Ethics, of history, will be found an age hence neither false nor unfortunate, but will rank immediately and equally with all the masters whom we now acknowledge." (*EL*, III, 200)

Again, Emerson carefully avoids phrasing the matter in such a way that it would suggest that the poet's writing can be instrumentalised to bring about the "age hence." The "genius of his day" ambivalently refers to both the genius of the scholar as well as to the genius of the age and thus suggests that there is always an eventfulness that goes beyond the scholar's intentions. The scholar, very much like Emerson's representative man – who, by virtue of being representative, is more than what he is consciously aware of – thus functions as a kind of receptor who by receiving what he terms an "influx [...] of power," an "inspiration" or an "exctasy" (*W*, I, 335), "unconsciously" or "genially" (*J*, V, 80) transforms what he receives by poetically refiguring it in the act of representation.

Emerson's repeated return to the scene of America's *troping* also needs to be read as a response to his disappointment with the progress of American culture.

Although having broken free from European command and having adopted a more enlightened form of government, Emerson and his contemporaries are disappointed to see that America does not (yet) surpass Europe in the arts and letters. While Emerson at times reflects a certain pride in the American polity in his journals, he also acknowledges what he perceives to be America's lack of cultural imagination.[10] Emerson sometimes attempts to explain this lack of a specifically American form of imagination in almost Hegelian terms as an expression of a broader historical tendency:

> "The history of America since the Revolution is meager because it has been all that time under better government, better circumstances of religious, moral, political, commercial prosperity than any nation ever was before. History will continually grow less interesting as the world grows better." (*J*, I, 220)

Emerson will continue to insist that "there is yet a dearth of American genius" (J, 3, 306) and maybe it is important to remember at this point that for him American society is not *per se* a culture of letters.[11] The vision of the properly poetic organization of America is decidedly the vision of an America yet to come, and "The American Scholar" is the programmatic rather than descriptive representation of that future state of culture in which the American genius will finally come to fruition.

The provocation of "The American Scholar"

The audience that assembled to hear Emerson's lecture on the "The American Scholar" on August 31st, 1837, was an illustrious crowd, including James Russell Lowell, Wendell Philips, Unitarian ministers, members of Harvard's faculty as well as a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Joseph Story. The intellectual heavyweights that had assembled for the annual Phi Beta Kappa society address, however, knew very well that they lived in turbulent times. Following the towering success of Andrew Jackson's presidential campaign, American politics tended to be more populist and many were no longer interested in the Great American Enlightenment that the Federalists had promoted a generation before. Consequently, the Phi Beta Kappa society, itself part of that old intellectual elite, was well aware that intellectuals were increasingly mistrusted and, even, marginalized in contemporary society.

The crowd that gathered at Brattle Street Church, rather than contemplating the challenges of the new era, was instinctively conservative and viewed America's

10 On contemporary fantasies at surpassing Europe, see Merle Curti's *Growth of American Thought* (Curti 1982: 140-48) as well as Barbara L. Packer's *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (1982: 85-95).

11 Indeed, the foundational link is probably one that is to be found rather between aesthetics and politics in a society that feared the arts but developed a detailed legal understanding of the artificiality of the state.

recent political and cultural development with mistrust. Having seen the multiplication of American destinies during Jackson's presidency, they were anxious about a potential loss of an American culture common to all its inhabitants. After all, this was an eagerly patriotic society that, in its annual orations, had always been celebrating American culture. Already in 1818, Edward Tyrell Channing (later Professor of rhetorics and oratory and one of the forming influences for Emerson and other Transcendentalists) insisted on the "American Scholar" and urged Americans to "cultivate domestic literature", so "that your countrymen, in every part of the union may feel a close [...] intimacy" and "a source of national pride and unity" (qtd. in Sacks 2003: 26). It goes without saying that Emerson's audience would have been acutely aware of the textual history of these orations.

But Emerson, who was the second choice of the organizing committee after Reverend Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright withdrew, in "The American Scholar" (*W*, I, 79-115) boldly subverts what had then become a well-established topic. More significantly, he subverts the well-established phrase of the title by simply refusing to deal with it in the standard terms. Emerson does precisely *not* specify, as the title would suggest, the character or political programme of the American scholar. He refuses to perpetuate what had repeatedly been defined "with nationalistic and moral overtones" (Sacks 2003: 31) by previous orators. Clearly, his definition of the American Scholar "without dwelling on what is uniquely American" (Sacks 2003: 31) disturbed the contemporary audience and many – Channing, for instance – criticised Emerson for suggesting that not individual but common genius was the gold standard for American culture. What is even more significant is that Emerson does not really talk about the scholar, rather, he talks about ways of reading and writing. The title is thus somewhat of a misnomer because the principal argument of "The American Scholar" consists in its not being about the American Scholar. Needless to say that his audience, trained in the system of American typology and thus acutely aware of Emerson's violation of the form, would have shifted nervously in their chairs.

Emerson's principal provocation in "The American Scholar" is that he turns away from the idea of a 'government by the best' – which for the Unitarian audience could only mean the Harvard men – to insist on a kind of popular sovereignty also in the realm of art and culture. The Harvard elite advocated an elitarian democracy, because they feared that the principle of a dispersion of power that was characteristic of democracy would be transferred to the realms of art and culture and that America could therefore only hope for a mediocre culture. From Alexis de Tocqueville to Henry James and beyond, commentators have repeated this topos when they described America as a prosaic nation, "a characteristic that [...] leads to the production of a second-rate literature – romance" (Kronick 1991: 163), as Kronick summarizes the well-known stereotype.

Romance, in Hegelian terms, is the expression of a country that lacks a certain historical gravity. And Hegel argues in his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* that "[d]er Roman im modernen Sinne setzt eine bereits zur Prosa geordnete Wirklichkeit voraus" (*TWA*, XV, 392). It seems that the Harvard men imagined themselves as Hegel's *weltgeschichtliche Individuen,* advocating an elitist project of moral guidance. For them, the development of a national literature was less an investigation of the culture of the American people than a claim for moral leadership. As Channing states the claim: "We know nothing so fitted to the advancement of society, as to bring its higher minds to bear upon the multitude; as to establish close connexions between." Literature, argues Channing, "is plainly among the most powerful methods […] of forming a better race of men" (Channing 1845: 248)). Against the intuition of the Harvard elite and impartial to the moral example of Harvard men, Emerson in "The American Scholar" makes a strong claim for popular sovereignty not just in the field of politics but in those of arts and culture as well. The period had seen other orators who had approached the society with different agendas of legal, social, or political reform. Here, however, comes an orator who provokes his audience because he calls for a reform of their souls, because he wants to change them from "scholar" to "Man thinking" (*W*, I, 84, 89, 91). No wonder then that Emerson's address is met with fierce resistance by the two-hundred or so present, who consider themselves New England's elite. After "The American Scholar" (and after the no less controversial Divinity School Address in the following year), it will be almost thirty years before Emerson is again welcomed to speak at Harvard. When he finally returns under the auspices of Harvard's Charles William Eliot – who cites Emerson as the inspiration for his curricular reforms – the writer that was once chastised a dangerous thinker is now the central figure in American literature and thought.

While earlier Phi Beta Kappa orations had stressed the importance of the classics and attempted to establish a link between the massive canon of Western literature and what Americans themselves still considered an infant American literature, Emerson here puts his focus on the individual writer and reader, and on the concreteness or materiality of the 'American' moment in which he writes or reads. Instead of suggesting how American literature can match the example of the classics, Emerson thus radically particularizes or localizes knowledge and the practice of reading and writing in the individual and in the contemporary moment. This is how Emerson summarizes the traditional attitude towards literature: "We read the verses of one of the great English poets, of Chaucer, of Marvell, of Dryden, with the most modern joy, – with a pleasure, I mean, which is in great part caused by the abstraction of all *time* from their verses" (*W*, I, 91-92). But Emerson argues that our contemporary moment needs to be brought to bear upon our reading of literary texts. And this can only happen if we are willing to expose ourselves to a potential in language, namely the potential of meaning and of

figuration: "One must be an inventor to read well" (*W*, I, 92), Emerson says to suggest how every individual process of reading is essentially irreducible because it is always implied in the temporality of its own contemporary moment as well as in that of its own performance in reading. "There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusions. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world" (W, I, 93). Against the mere perpetuation or extension of the European classics to American culture, Emerson posits a moment of unbridled meaning, of a troping that is performed as an actual performance or *Vollzug* of sense.

Taking into account Emerson's interest in instances of troping, one begins to wonder how the address could have nevertheless been taken to suggest the beginning of an American literary nationalism. There is, I want to insist, a strong sense in which "The American Scholar" is not about the wholeness of a national culture or about the identity of the scholar. Rather, Emerson's 'American' writing is involved in a complex relationship with other writings and readings, and the call for intellectual independence leads us back to an even more pronounced statement that there is nothing original in the statement of the scholar. This is phrased more explicitely when Emerson acknowledges, nearing his conclusion, that "I have dwelt perhaps tediously upon this abstraction of the scholar. I ought not to delay longer to add what I have to say, of nearer reference to the time and to this country" (*W*, I, 108). He then calls on the audience to study everyday, popular culture, mentioning as models European writers – Goldsmith, Burns, Cowper, Goethe, Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Swedenborg. "The American Scholar" then, is defined by Emerson in terms of its European models. That Emerson had the audacity to define the American Scholar without dwelling on what is uniquely American shocked an audience that had grown accustomed to the ritual of Phi Beta Kappa orations.

> "I accept the topic which not only usage, but the nature of our association, seem to prescribe to this day, – the AMERICAN SCHOLAR. Year by year we come up hither to read one more chapter of his biography. Let us inquire what light new days and events have thrown on his character, and its hopes." (*W*, I, 82)

Emerson's conclusion is that there is strictly speaking no such thing as the American scholar yet. In fact, and this is the reason why his address causes such a stir, that there is, yet, no such thing as an 'American' Literature. Rather, Emerson hopes that the American scholar will be the result of a process that has only just begun. But, because what is uniquely American is still a category not adequately defined, it cannot be presupposed and needs to be 'effected' in America's very own contemporary moment. This is further underwritten by the fact that Emerson's essay almost programmatically replaces the figure of scholar with that of the writer. And simultanously, the supposed representation of a world that is characteristically

'American' is replaced by an eventfulness and, therefore, the present of a text, a text that happens, a text that is itself "creative." The writer or scholar thus comes into play as a kind of medium, as a vehicle of transference that enables complex processes of troping so that a new text may be produced, finally, in writing. In and out of his own contingent moment in the present, the scholar can alone secure America's transition by abandoning himself to a process of textual refiguration or troping.

Let us then briefly return to America's Hamletian dilemma that Emerson outlines in "The American Scholar": "We, it seems, are critical," Emerson argues and suggests that America's current epoch is characterized by a turning of thought against itself – Emerson terms it America's "age of Introversion" (*W*, I, 109). America's contemporary situation for Emerson is thus marked by the advent of the modern, by a situation in which rationality comes full circle to confront itself. It is the moment in which American thinking forces the very adjective 'American' out of its hiding, turns upon itself, becomes critical and reflects upon its own reflection of America. Jacques Derrida has described this modern moment of self-reflection as the moment of dissemination, and I think his comments are relevant in our context[12]: Emerson does not attempt to establish a stable framework in which the meaning of America can be sorted out once and for all. Rather, he is interested in what he later calls "the moment of germination" (*W*, VII, 38), that is, in a moment where the text itself becomes creative, and thus produces new meaning. The resulting play of meaning speaks of "the impossibility of reducing a text as such to its effects of meaning, content, thesis, or theme" (Derrida 1981: 7), and attests to the fact that America – both as a nation and as a concept – needs to be produced poetically, needs to undergo a continual process of poetic revision.

For Emerson, the moment of America's 'dissemination' and subsequent poetic refiguration can alone guarantee and maintain the promise of America's next age. And the exit from its current "age of Introversion" is effected not simply by a repudiation of everything that is old, but by way of a subsumption of the "contributions of the past" (*W*, II, 113) into a new *figuration* that will itself be creative because it displaces earlier articulations of 'America.' As Derrida has it: "Even while it keeps the text it culls alive, this play of insemination – or grafting – destroys their hegemonic centre, subverts their authority and their uniqueness" (Derrida 1981: 378). America's criticism, its introversion or self-implication, because it makes the terms of tradition available, is consequently the necessary condition for its transition into the next age. As Emerson argues: "I look upon the discontent of the literary class, as a mere announcement of the fact, that they find themselves not in the state of mind of their fathers, and regret the coming state as

12 See also Derrida's comment in *Dissemination*: "Germination, dissemination. There is no first insemination. The semen is already swarming. The 'primal' insemination is dissemination. A trace, a graft whose traces have been lost" (1981: 334).

untried" (*W*, I, 109-110). America's obsessive self-inspection thus marks a liminal moment in American culture and it suggests a temporal moment that goes beyond a Hegelian model of history. Here, the transition into the next epoch includes a moment of risk, it is incalculable, "untried," as Emerson phrases it. America, "as a boy dreads the water before he has learned that he can swim" (*W*, I, 110), stands on the verge of something new but is unable to specify the new state yet. This is why the "signs of the coming days" are "auspicious" (*W*, I, 110), only "glimmer[ing] […] through poetry and art, through philosophy and science, through church and state" (*W*, I, 110).

"Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds" (*W*, I, 110): Emerson's elaboration of a liminal or transitional moment of American culture is further underscored by the peculiar temporal perspective that he asks the scholar to adopt. While Emerson acknowledges a strong American individualism – the "new importance given to the single person" (*W*, I, 113) –, he asserts the value of the individual scholar or writer only insofar as he himself becomes an "unsearched might" (*W*, I, 114) that opens to the world to become a "university of knowledge" (*W*, I, 113):

> "The scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future. […] The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends, in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason" (*W*, I, 113-114).

This is then not simply Emerson's endorsement of an American individualism. Rather, when the scholar and the world are brought to equal terms, when the individual is made to correspond with the world, then a radical decentring of the individual is effected. He is no longer the instance that controls the processes that he is supposed to have instigated. He becomes a kind of transferential medium that is exposed to forces always larger than himself. Again we see here at work Emerson's peculiar *mise-en-scène* of a correspondence, of a *Wechselverhältnis* – Emerson simply calls it a "relation" – of man and world. The writer or scholar needs to be a "being […] without bound" (*W*, I, 120), he needs to extend beyond himself and into the world. His temperament is therefore characteristically a certain responsiveness to the world. It makes him a permeable membrane, prepared for the "influx of light and power" (*W*, I, 335) as Emerson phrases it in "The Transcendentalist."

It is important to maintain, however, that already here in "The American Scholar" – and despite the title of the address –, Emerson starts to imagine a tentative solution to America's cultural conundrum that it is no longer simply dependant upon a discourse of the individual genius. Here he proposes that genius itself is produced by popular culture and thereby also conceives of a possible mediation between what he perceives to be the increasing conflict between American individualism and the American culture of community. In America, the

meaning of the scholar's words effectively needs to be "unlocked" by the "resounding tumult" (W, I, 95) that they produce. This "*other me*" (W, I, 95) of the communal world around the scholar consequently suggests that it is precisely a principle of multiplicity – the manifold conduits between the scholar and the responding audience – that will ensure America's cultural transition.

Emerson's argument here obviously comes as a challenge to the arguments of the Phi Beta Kappa orations in the years before that had suggested that the volatile social conditions called for a limitation of majority rule. More specifically, it responds to Brown University president Wayland's address in the year before Emerson delivers "The American scholar." Wayland's 1836 talk is lost, but we have a record by John Pierce, longstanding secretary of the Board of Overseers at Harvard University and a devoted chronicler of academic life at Harvard. Wayland, so Pierce,

> "alludes with deep feeling to the dangers of our Republic from the despotism of the many, in the language of the passionate and unprincipled appeals to the prejudice of the vulgar, and in the form of mobs and other ways in which justice is anticipated or perverted by those not immediately authorized to dispense it." (Pierce qtd. in Sacks 2003: 27)

Before Wayland, it was William Ellery Channing who in 1830 established the topic of a specifically American literature in his "Remarks on National Literature" (Channing 1845). And a number of passages in Emerson's journals show that he was aware of the discussions surrounding a national literature at Harvard.[13] Emerson must have known that his remarks on what he considered to be the failures of a national culture were to provoke those who considered themselves to be the very elite of that culture. On top of that, Emerson also does not respect the familiar procedures of Unitarian philosophy, but mixes its terms with examples taken from everyday life to suggest how beauty and writing develop out of the ordinary by way of a "strange process":

> "It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds here splendid products. A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought [...] The manufacture goes forward at all hours. The actions and events of our childhood and youth, are not matters of calmest observation. [...] Not so with our recent actions, – with the business which we now have in hand. On this we are quite unable to speculate. Our affections as yet circulate through it. [...] The new deed is yet a part of life, – remains for a time immersed in our unconscious life. In some contemplative hour, it detaches itself from the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind. Instantly, it is raised, transfigured; the corruptible has put on incorruption." (*W*, I, 95-6)

This is obviously a far cry from Unitarian doctrine since Emerson suggests that this "strange process" of things becoming language or writing, is itself an event, a transfiguration. Arguing against philosophical common sense, Emerson states that

13 See, for example, *J*, I, 399; *J*, III, 38; *J*, III, 275; *J*, IV, 315; *J*, V, 86-87.

"[l]ife is our dictionary" (*W*, I, 98) and locates a potential in the ordinary that can not be controlled by philosophical doctrine. Only by abandoning himself to the spontaneous movement of life, of experience, Emerson argues, can the scholar prepare the grounds for a national literature. Emerson also implies that this literature will come as a challenge to the traditions of thought that the short history of America has established. "The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other" (*W*, I, 99), Emerson says, and insinuates that the translation of the ordinary into writing happens in a "fit," that is, in a vanishing moment of creativity or geniality that always already eludes the artistic control of the scholar, the writer, or the poet.

> "When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended, and books are a weariness, – he has always the resource to live. Character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary." (*W*, I, 99)

No wonder, then, that Emerson's claim must have seemed highly counter-intuitive to the contemporary elite assembled at Harvard. While Harvard philosophers strove to find ways to match the achievements of continental thought, Emerson argues for a renewed attention to the objects of everyday life: "The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body; – show me the ultimate reason of these matters" (*W*, I, 111). We find here, then, an instance of what Cavell has called Emerson's "investment in the ordinary" (Cavell 1990: 35). And Emerson himself notes in his journal that "the roots of what is great and high must still be in the common life" (*J*, IV, 213).

Emerson's argument in "The American Scholar" can further be read as a tentative attempt at healing the rift between the scholar (the writer, the poet, etc.) and the life of the community. Emerson imagines a way in which the ordinary circumstances of life 'produce' genius and thereby suggests that the sign of America's revolution will precisely not be a literature that aspires to represent the "sublime" or the "beautiful" but, rather, one that finds ways of "poetizing" the "familiar" or the "low":

> "One of these signs [of the revolution taking place in the present age] is the fact, that the same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state, assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful; the near the low the common, was explored and poetized. [...] The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign, – is it not? – of new vigor. [...] I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic. [...] I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low." (*W*, I, 110-111)

I am not sure, however, whether Emerson is able to resolve the conflict between the idiosyncrasy of genius and the force of collective culture here in "The American Scholar." He never quite establishes or attains a balance between the

two. Even tough the essay makes a very strong argument against what Emerson considers to be the prevailing elitism at Harvard, it goes back behind *Nature* in asserting the influence of individual elements of society.[14]

It is only by giving up on his philosophical ambitions that the scholar may become a true paradigm giver. By abandoning himself to the ordinary, he is no longer one who merely represents, describes or understands. "Thinking now" and "acting now", as Emerson phrases it, the scholar can write the very law of history, because when he, in a "fit," translates the material of common life into writing, his representation will refigure the world and will make the advent of a new age possible. The scholar thus becomes the active agent of history because by refiguring it in the light of present experience, he may change the course of history altogether.

> "Yes, we are the cowed, – we the trustless. It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago. As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it. […] [A]s a man has any thing in him divine, the firmament flows before him and takes his signet and form. […] They are the kings of the world who give the color of their present thought to all nature and all art, and persuade men by the cheerful serenity of their carrying the matter that this thing which they do, is the apple which the ages have desired to pluck, now at last ripe, and inviting nations to the harvest. The great man makes the great thing." (*W*, I, 105)

The American scholar's attention to the contemporary moment of his culture is thus essential in sustaining America's epochal promise. And it is by "giving colour," that is, by a process of figuration that American will finally fulfill this promise.

As Steven Weisbuch has argued in his study *Atlantic Double-Cross. American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson,* there is then, in Emerson and other writers of the time, the discovery of something that Weisbuch calls "actualism":

> "To the extent that American history was brief and the American present consequently undefined, possibility could flourish. For the first time in a long time, literary vision could be socially implemented. If, as the American writer had discovered, history could be created by thought, so too thought could create a living history. History could be imagined as a creative invention and then implemented. Actualism, then, meant reverse verisimilitude, life modelled on the mind's design."[15]

To Emerson, this "creative invention" also means, as we have already seen, the "gradual domestication of the idea of Culture" (*W*, I, 107). And he believes that it is a collective process rather than an individual act of genius: "The human mind cannot be enshrined in a person, who shall set a barrier on any one side to this

14 For an insightful reading of "The American Scholar" focusing on some of the conceptual problems of the essay, see see Kenneth Sack's *Understanding Emerson: "The American scholar" and His Struggle for Self-Reliance* (Sacks 2003: 21-47).

15 See Steven Weisbuch in *Atlantic Double-Cross. American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (1986: xiv.).

unbounded, unboundable empire" (*W*, I, 108). His oration before the Phi Betta Kappa society consequently executes both a problematization of history as well as of the ability of the scholar to alter its course. "[H]im the past instructs; him the future invites" (*W*, I, 84), but the vanishing moment of transition between the past and the future itself cannot be preordained by the scholar's intentional activity. The scholar and the writer too face a "power" that "returns into itself" and that cannot be entirely controlled by them. And like "nature" in Emerson's thought, the scholar and the writer are themselves self-reflexive structures, they are defined by the effects they produce. As Emerson phrases it:

> "There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find, – so entire, so boundless. Far too as her splendors shine, system on system shooting like rays, upward, downward, without centre, without circumference, – in the mass and in the particle, Nature hastens to render account of herself to the mind." (*W*, I, 85)

Emerson insists that a possible answer to the dilemma of American belatedness – the "mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago" – lies precisely in this self-reflexivity of the human: because he knows about the burden of the past, the scholar, turning to his own contemporary moment, can discover something yet to be realized, can conceive of more relations to be stumbled upon. But Emerson is well aware the relation between man and world is only a tentative one. "That which he venerates is still his own, though he has not realized it yet. *He ought*" (*W*, I, 120-121). But, as in other places, this call for cultural renovation is here too phrased as an optative, as something that may momentarily heal the rift between man and world but may, the very next moment, again be dissolved. The scholar or writer, as "Man Thinking" may consequently bring about the "conversion of the world" (*W*, I, 115), but only if he is willing to expose himself to the world, to open up to a potential or promise of contemporary existence not yet fulfilled. "The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived" (*W*, I, 95). Poetry or, for that matter, philosophy, both acquire their function or meaning not because their value has been established by tradition. They can only effect a potential conversion of the world and the writer if they respond to the multiplicity of life in the present and if they themselves function as a medium of a poetic *Vollzug*. Instead of perpetrating a philosophical system familiar to his audience, Emerson thus argues that action, coming out of the ungovernable multitude of life, may transform the world. But it does not do so in an instrumental or pragmatic sense: this willingness to be exposed to the variety and variability of life does not secure the ground. Occasionally, it may make the writer the guarantor of a new world. But, as Weisbuch has argued, this attitude also includes the moment of an "epistemological daring" (Weisbuch 1986: xiv) that may endanger our world as we

know it. This is why "a different, sometimes contradictory attitude" (Weisbuch 1986: xiv) always develops alongside Emerson's trademark optimism. It imagines that the world may be lost and that the scholar's optimistic expectation of a different future is disappointed. Emerson's empowerment of the writer and the scholar thus always comes at a price: the individual is radically thrown back upon itself: "[A] man is made the Providence to himself" (W, I, 123), as Emerson phrases it in the "Divinity School Address" of the following year. And this necessary self-implication is also the fundamental risk that always underwrites the optimistic assertion of what Emerson will later elaborate as the doctrine of "Self-Reliance."

Three

History, Quotation, Hermeneutics

The literature of colonial American has often been read as the representative depiction of an experience that is, quintessentially, 'American'. It has often served as a privileged point of reference out of which critics have projected a trajectory of a specifically 'American' literature. Thus, these texts have been read as early points of departure for a literary tradition that eventually solidified into a specifically 'American' literary canon. Concentrating on cataloguing the various *topoi americanii* in these early texts, trying to establish a canon of exemplary yet representative works, critics have ignored, however, that even these early texts do not lend themselves easily towards a definition of 'Americanness'. The literature of colonial America does not directly represent what it may have produced: 'America'. Therefore it may ultimately be questionable to simply assume its 'representativity.' I want to argue, on the contrary, that it describes an essentially nascent or transitional state, a state in which 'America' is not yet a stable frame of reference and, therefore, the qualities of 'Americanness' are yet unsecured. Consequently, early descriptions of the dangerous passage as well as of the arrival upon the foreign shore as well as accounts of the laying of the land are not so much a point of origin for a specifically 'American' culture, and not so much the discovery of a new experience that could be called 'American.' Rather, these early texts present themselves precisely as a complication of such an origin insofar as they identify the lack of a common vision or national myth shared among the early settlers. If we still want to refer to these early texts as quintessentially 'American' texts, then this has far-reaching implications for our taxonomy of American culture: transitionality, then, is not merely a characteristic feature of this early culture in-between old Europe and the new continent. Rather, to call these early texts 'American' would mean to in fact locate this aspect of transitionality as the characteristic feature at the heart of 'American' culture. And 'America', then, would be precisely another name for this experience of transitionality. This definition is far from unproblematic: if we identify the transitional as being at the heart of the 'American' experience, then it may indeed be very difficult to fix the meaning of the term 'America'.

I will illustrate early 'American' literature's complication of a shared point of origin, its being no longer European but not yet 'American', by making a case in

point: John Winthrop's sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity" (Winthrop 1996: 33) was delivered on board the *Arbella*. Winthrop's sermon strongly foregrounds transitionality right in its opening paragraph:

> "A MODELL OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY.
> WRITTEN ON BOARD THE ARBELLA, ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN.
> By the Hon. John Winthrop Esqr.
> In his passage (with a great company of Religious people, of which Christian tribes he was the Brave Leader and famous Governor;) from the Island of Great Brittaine to New-England in the North America. Anno 1630." (in Morgan 2003: 76)

If for a moment we imagine the precarious scene – Winthrop's audience assembles on the weather-beaten deck of the Arbella in the middle of a stormy autumnal Atlantic – then it becomes obvious that Winthrop's description of a moment of passage is not yet the beginning of a characteristically 'American' experience. On the contrary: the way in which Winthrop's text forefronts the historical singularity of the event of this passage does precisely not allow for a historical projection. The passage is an event, both a *crossing* from one place to another as well as a *rupture*, radically disconnecting what is left behind from what is yet to come (the arrival upon the foreign shore, the laying of the land, the discovery of what it means to be 'American,' etc.). All there is, here and now, on the ship somewhere between England and the New World, is the faint and doubtful vision that

> "wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world […] [T]he Lord our God may blesse us in the land whether wee go to possesse it: But if our heartes shall turne away soe that wee will not obey […] it is propounded unto us this day, wee shall surely perishe out of the good Land whether wee passe over this vast Sea to possesse it." (in Morgan 2003: 93)

Therefore, Winthrop's sermon is an exceptional or, rather, eccentric piece of text that attempts to tell the story of a land that does not have a history yet, of a people and a land that can only imaginatively be conjured up by Wintrhop's words. The Pilgrims assembled on the deck of the *Arbella* thus find themselves in a place *in-between*, transitional and liminal, with a future that is as promising as it is precarious. Consequently, Winthrop's text is not, as has often been suggested, just a prophetic statement about or an uncomplicated anticipation of American culture. By focusing on the eventfulness of the passage, it stresses an intermediary moment of the present effecting the transition between past and future. Later sermons, those by Emerson included, keep this focus on the present moment as a passage that mediates between the past and the future.

Interestingly enough, this 'spirit' of transitionality is also preserved by the texts that were written by the settlers after their arrival. In these descriptions of the laying of the land following the arrival on virgin soil, the writers often exhibit a certain perplexity that the discovery of the new land is not followed by the communal discovery of an 'American' experience. *Of Plimmoth Plantation*

(Bradford 1959), for example, contrary to a narrative that equals the arrival on the new shores with the finding of a new sense of community, speaks of a certain vexation over the decline of communal zeal and the erosion of (Puritan) conviction, that American settlers had to come to terms with. Bradford explicitly laments the weakening of the "bonds of love" as the primitive early economy shifted its focus to cattle raising and the colonists left the town of Plymouth to be closer to their farms.[1] Maurice Stein has shown convincingly in *The Eclipse of Community* (Stein 1972) that the transition from a collectivist or communal Puritan culture to a prospering agricultural colony foreshadows the fragmentary tendencies that will later come to characterize American social life. Also, he argues that the growing concerns over the transformation of their communities are a much more frequent topic in early American literature than is generally admitted. Undeniably, they outweigh celebrations of the early settler's achievements. That is: The communal bonds established by the passage (e.g. the various kinds of contracts signed by the settlers during the crossing), start to dissolve immediately after the settlers' arrival upon the new shores and the lament of the decline of community with its Tocquevillean overtones of incipient individualism makes obvious, as Thomas Bender noted in *Community and Social Change in America* (Bender 1978: 23-24), that the new settlements are not going to hold as 'germ cells' for a new 'American' society. This also means that even the very first texts of the 'American' tradition are, strictly speaking, an expression of a transitional state rather than of an early 'American' culture. Early American texts, do not so much express a 'common sense' but draw attention to the makeshift nature of the cultural make-up of 'America'. By identifying America's state as liminal, they problematize and undermine exactly those characterizations of American culture that have since become the standard tropes and originary commonplaces of American Studies.

Rites of passage

These texts, then, rather than providing a representative account of early America that, as a point of origin, allows for the projection of a continuous American tradition, offer multiple meanings for America. Refusing to accept Roy Harvey Pearce's classic argument about the "continuity" of American poetry, critics have

1 The Restoration in 1660 greatly changed the situation of the Puritan settlements in New England. The government in London wanted New England to remain English and was alarmed by the strong Puritan hold upon these settlements. In England, Charles II started a campaign that made the passage to North America promising also for Anglicans, Quakers, and Methodists. The influx of a secularly-minded and economically ambitious people significantly weakened the Puritan communities. While the Colonists decided to respond with persecutions, the pressure from the home land as well as a growing secularism that was the result of a burgeoning trade soon made what was a closely-knit religious culture break up. The Puritans consequently lost not only their exclusive control of the coastal settlements. With the defeat of the Indian nations and the successive settlement of the New England back country, the last Puritan communities were lost.

elaborated how early American literature is reluctant or even outright refuses to fix the meaning of 'America' and of 'providence' (see Stein 1972; Rosenmeier 1972).[2] Again, Bradford's *Of Plimmoth Plantation* may serve as a good example here. Although it is usually read as a 'history,' *Of Plimmoth Plantation* is not a mere chronographic description suggesting the organic continuity of American history. Douglas Anderson has shown in his revisionist reading of the textual complexity of Bradford's book (Anderson 2003) that, if this is to be the origin of the American tradition, then this origin is more unstable and more complex than is generally acknowledged. Anderson argues convincingly that the signature of *Plimmoth Plantation* is nothing but its textual and narrative complexity, the way in which it revises, quotes, collects, and compiles from older texts. Anderson successfully applies his elucidation of the textual "complexity" of Bradford's text to complicate its status as an origin for American culture and he shows that *Plimmoth Plantation* fails to fix the meaning of 'America' because it is already complicit in a process of quotation, adaptation, and revision. Consequently, the text that serves as the origin of the tradition that is to bear the name 'American' cannot specify what 'American' means but, rather, attempting to do so gets caught up in a complex *textual process*. Furthermore, Anderson argues for a double meaning of complexity: both literature and ethical practice are here made to mirror each other in the way in which Bradford comments in his "carefully interwoven" (Anderson 2003: 107) pages both on his own writing as well as on that of others (Mourts, Brewster, Winslow, the letters by Chauncy integrated into the *History*, etc.). The textual complexity then is not only a sign of the instability of the alleged tradition. In a more general sense, I want to argue, it is also the sign of the instability and contestedness of the meaning of 'America'. What has been widely regarded as the first text of the American tradition, is thus exposed as a fundamentally displaced origin, an origin that is itself already caught up in a complex process of quotation and revision.

Maybe, the early settlers' almost obsessive impulse to chronologize is a good indication of the precariousness and essential unsecuredness of their venture in early America. Bradford's *Of Plimmoth Plantation* and Winthrop's "History of the New England" (Winthrop 1996), as well as lesser known histories, chronicles, and diaries may serve as a reminder that Americans were anxious, even long after their settlements had been securely established, about the essentially unsecured nature of 'American' culture and experience. The obsession to chronologize, then,

2 The case for the "continuity" of American literature was made persuasively in Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961). However, in his search for continuities and coherent historical clusters, Pearce ignores the significant disparities of 'American' literature. By reducing American writing to two labels, the "Adamic mode" and the "Mythic mode," and then by trying to bring these together on some sort of neutral 'middle ground,' Pearce ignores the influence of antinomianism in the field of American literature. And even if Pearce repeatedly highlights the lack of an American sense of *communitas*, he nevertheless unquestioningly posits an American experience as the ground of an American poetics. Pearce's narrative consequently reduces American poetry into overly simple categories and takes no notice of texts that disrupt the continuity of American writing by insisting on something that is irreducible to the narratives of 'providence,' 'America,' etc.

betrays the lack of a historical fundament for 'America'. Of course, if we read these early texts as points of origin for a new culture and as early examples of a description of a characteristically 'American' experience, then we will encounter a tradition that has always already been 'American'. However, and as an analysis of Winthrop's and Bradford's sermons would confirm, early American literature does not so much express the sudden discovery of a new point of origin for a natively 'American' culture and literature, rather, these early texts draw attention to the fact that 'America' is, essentially, another name for a culture of liminality, for a culture that continually needs to leave its own origins behind and define its history anew.

These early texts consequently define America's situation as one of always already *not* having arrived. America's cultural situation can thus be described in terms of what Bernhard Waldenfels has called a *Zwischenereignis* (an "event in-between" or an "in-between events"): it is to be located in the space between different orders of the world, characterized by an unusual temporality that does not conform to standard models of history (Waldenfels 1994: 46). Emerson's interest and elaboration of the present moment, of something that he calls the "verge of to-day," concerns precisely this paradoxical structure of a present always already divided in itself, exhibiting the temrporal structure of an 'originary' posteriority, irreducibly a remainder of the past but also a potential opening towards the advent of the future. And, as we will see, it is precisely in its capacity of not having arrived, of not being wholly present with itself, that the Emersonian "to-day" also provides a general description for the culture that is 'America.' How America critically turns back to or upon itself, how it complicates its present by investigating its connection with the past or its potential connections with a (qualitatively different) future, that, for Emerson, defines 'America' as a culture.

But maybe this is not so much Emerson's singular apprehension: a similar insight has simply been overlooked in early American literature. In Winthrop's sermon, the slogan with which he charges his audience on the *Arbella* to start an 'American' life comes in the form of both an optative as well as a quotation: "[W]e shall be as a city upon a hill." The ideal for the new society is one derived from an old text, the Old Testament. The vision of a coming American *communitas* is upheld via the quotation of the Old Testament's description of Zion, the city of Enoch. Paradoxically enough, then, the spiritually renewed society expresses itself in the oldest terms, and the society that is to go beyond the beliefs of the old continent can only phrase its founding in the diction of the old.

The passage described so arrestingly by Winthrop and Bradford has to be retaken continually if the idea of 'America' is to make any sense. Americans consequently are, to use a term coined by Victor Turner, "liminars". Turner's description of liminars and liminality may be helpful in our context because it allows for an application of the terms both on an individual as well as collective level. Turner argues in *On the Edge of the Bush* that "'[l]iminars' [...] may be

initiands or novices in passage from one sociocultural state and status to another, or even whole populations undergoing transition [...]" (Turner 1985: 159). And although rituals of liminality are typically associated with a preservation of order and power, liminality itself can be a condition in which the possibility of freedom can be experienced. Turner in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*: "[I]n this gap between ordered worlds almost anything may happen. In this interim of 'liminality,' the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements" (Turner 1974: 13-14). Liminality may occasion a radical restructuration of the current structures of a society. It may bring about a communion of equals, which Turner calls *communitas,* "a liminal phenomenon, consisting of a blend of humility and comradeship" (Turner 1985: 173), but it may also lead to the occlusion of what used to be a transparent social or communal arrangement. The anxiety characteristic of states of liminality is then counterpoised by the experience of choice and multiplicity that it grants. The passage, therefore, is both a dislodgment, a transposition form one world to another, as well as a potentially a rupture, precariously disconnecting the history of the new world from the old.

The Pilgrims' writing provides plenty of references to this kind of liminality, of a people standing on the threshold (the *limen*) between two worlds. One of the most remarkable instances is again to be found in *Of Plimmoth Plantation* where Bradford describes the curious experience of arriving upon the new shore as a sort of hiatus:

> "[F]or being now passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before them in expectation what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wilde beasts, and wilde men? and what multitudes of them there were, they then knew not: for which way soever they turned their eyes (save upward to Heaven) they could have but little solace or content in respect of any outward object; for summer being ended, all things stand in appearance with a weather-beaten face, and the whole country full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hew; if they looked behind them, there was the mighty ocean which they had passed, and was now as a main bar or gulph to separate them from all the civil parts of the world." (Bradford 1975, 62)

The ordeal of the "mighty ocean" finally behind them, the settlers set foot on the promised land for the first time. But it is not yet clear what the new world has in store for them: Bradford is careful not to present the first vision of the new continent in Arcadian terms. The coast of New England does not present itself as a pastoral idyll but, rather, as a chaotic, wild, and intimidating natural disorder – and indeed half the colony perishes before the first winter is over. The paragraph from Bradford's *Of Plimmoth Plantation* consequently stages the moment of an unsettled present, a moment *before* the institution of a national myth for 'America'. It presents the liminal moment of passage as an event that explodes the continuum of historical time, as a moment occurs in an eccentric temporality that is neither

commensurable with the received traditions (of the old continent left behind) nor indicative of a future life in a land that is yet to become 'America'. Bradford's account also shows that it is not able to contain this moment of revolutionary freedom. *Of Plimmoth Plantation*, as Robert Daly has argued, "begins magnificently, diminishes into a tedious account of unsorted administrative details, and ends, uncompleted, in silence" (Daly 1973: 557). The vision of the liminal moment between an old and a new world, also meant to be the textual point of departure for a splendid providential history, cannot finally be contained within a text and the account of how the new world would prove itself to be the promised land soon loses direction and, finally, breaks off and remains a fragment. It is as though the textual domestication of the revolutionary moment of passage into a chronologizing account produces nothing but a cumbersome accumulation of details.[3]

Even if the precariousness and volatility of the moment of passage was soon appeased by an overwhelming obsession to historicize – think of all the histories, chronologies, and journals that make up the corpus of early American literature –, the scene of the arrival has nevertheless proven to be of lasting fascination for Americans. Maybe this is because, as Andrew Delbanco has argued, the "process of change in ideas and feelings" in America "can be understood only in conjunction with the large material fact that stands at our beginning as a nation: the migration from one continent to another," the "journey out of one culture into another," that has not only defined the Pilgrims but all later immigrants too. Americans are, Delbanco's contends, following "the belief that our lives can be radically renewed" (Delbanco 1989: 250-251). Before there was an 'America,' then, there was the liminal experience of the event of the crossing.

Winthrop's and Bradford's accounts of the passage as a precarious moment have often been emulated in later American literature and the scene of the arrival itself has never failed to fascinate Americans: Henry David Thoreau, who himself "crossed the Cape half a dozen times", records his fascination in *Cape Cod* (Thoreau 1985: 851), but also draws attention to the topos in the following passage from *The Maine Woods*:

> "I am reminded by my journey how exceedingly new this country still is. You have only to travel for a few days into the interior [...] to come to that very America which the Northman and Cabot, and Gosnold, and Smith, and Raleigh visited. If Columbus was the first to discover the islands, Americus Vespucius and Cabot, and the Puritans, and we their descendants, have discovered only the shores of America. While the republic has already acquired a history world-wide, America is still unsettled and unexplored." (Thoreau 1985: 654)

3 For an assessment of the incoherent or fragmentary nature of Bradford's text, see Douglas Anderson's excellent *William Bradford's books: Of Plimmoth Plantation and the printed word* (2003: IV, 85, 209) and Robert Daly's comments "William Bradford's Vision of History" (Daly 1973).

With Walt Whitman, the twin visions of the liminal space of the beach and the turbulent sea abound in *Leaves of Grass* and come to be the central topoi of his (poetic) theory of democracy in the poem "Sea Drift" (2002: 206-21). George Santayana, in *Character and Opinion in the United States*, makes the scene of arrival stand for the Americans' continuing and "endless migration of the mind":

> "It is notorious how metaphysical was the passion that drove the Puritans to those shore; they went there in the hople of living more perfectly in the spirit. And their pilgrim's progress was not finished when they had founded their churches in the wilderness; an endless migration of the mind was still before them, a flight from those new idols and servitudes which prosperity involves, and the eternal lure of spiritual freedom and truth." (Santayana 1991: 4-5)

Emerson, too, repeatedly alludes to the scene of this arrival and it is part of a series of recurring images that he uses to characterize American culture. In "The Transcendentalist" (1841) he uses the image of the "sea-beach" to picture his time and its "modes of living" as essentially transitional. Only that Emerson transposes the ritual of the passage from an extraordinary event in the history of the nation into the eventfulness of the nation's everyday experience, into the eventfulness of an 'American' ordinary. In other words: the passage, for Emerson, is no longer the point of departure or the origin of the American people and nation. Rather, it is something that happens continually, all around us, in our everyday lives. Emerson's use of the image of the "sea-beach" functions as a symbol of 'America's' continual arrival, of its strange, everyday rite of passage, of the continual discovery and invention of 'America' in ordinary life. It is this passage, this strange eventfulness of the ordinary that, for Emerson, is 'America,' "for ever renewed to be for ever destroyed":

> "Soon these improvements and mechanical inventions will be superseded; these modes of living lost out of memory; these cities rotted, ruined by war, by new inventions, by new seats of trade, or the geologic changes: - all gone like the shells which sprinkle the sea-beach with a white colony to-day, for ever renewed to be for ever destroyed." (*W*, I, 359)

Clearly it is no coincidence that Emerson chooses to use the image of the "sea-beach" to talk about the transitional character of 'American culture': but it is essential to note here that Emerson attempts to make the scene of the arrival resonate with a more general assessment of 'American' culture and with his interest in what he calls the "verge of to-day", the epochal threshold or shift. The passage from one geographical space to another is here transformed into a more general principle of the cultural constitution of America: the continual arrival upon a new shore, the eventfulness of the passage, is precisely, Emerson suggests, America's cultural medium. Being forced to continually start anew, being forced, so to speak, to exercise its freedom, the event of the present, a simultaneous becoming and dissolution of America ("for ever renewed to be for ever destroyed") is both America's genius as well as its greatest peril. Because the evanescent medium of

the today, that brief and incalculable hiatus always also poses the risk of a possible suspension of a fragile tradition and of acquired ways of ordinary communal life. As Emerson argues in *The Conduct of Life*:

> "In history, the great moment is, when the savage is just ceasing to be a savage, with all his hairy Pelasgic strength directed on his opening sense of beauty - and you have Pericles and Phidias - not yet passed over into the Corinthian civility. Everything good in nature and the world is in that moment of transition, when the swarthy juices still flow plentifully from nature, but their astringency or acridity is got out by ethics and humanity." (W, VI, 70-71)

Emerson's persistent interest in this "moment of transition" has to be assessed also in respect of an American tendency to over-emphasize the value of tradition. Because America's history is, as it were, up for grabs, Americans have been particularly anxious about establishing traditions, discourses of identity, etc. To Emerson, however, this American fixation with the past and a distant future means nothing but an occlusion of the present moment and, therefore, a negation of the present's potential for intermission, disruption and change – something that for Emerson is tantamount to the possibility of freedom. The central American creed that it is possible "to begin the world anew", as Thomas Paine has famously put it in *Common Sense* (Paine 1945: I, 21), for Emerson does not carry any significance lest we begin *here and now*, out of the aporia of a precarious today. The occlusion of the present moment, almost total with the millenarian movement but also virulent elsewhere, for Emerson annuls the freedom to begin over again.

America's "cumbrous and embarrassed speech"

Emerson's thought is essentially poetic and his work provides a poetic response to the conundrum of America's passage. Emerson does never elaborate this response systematically, but this is precisely the point: It is exactly by *abandoning* his writing to poetic and rhetoric processes that it initiates a radical departure from the doctrine of "representative words" so influential in America. To adequately account for the moment of transition in writing, Emerson repudiates the notion of a language that is "one with things" (*J*, III, 492) and rejects the idea that language can guarantee a secure grip on the world. For Emerson, language's mediation or representation of the world necessarily remains problematic, just as the advent of a specifically American culture must remain a "postponed expectation". American speech, as he phrases it in his journal, is necessarily always "cumbrous, embarrassed speech," because America's "language itself is young and unformed" (*J*, III, 492).

We can only understand Emerson's approach to rhetoric – his attempts to find in it an adequate means to represent the "moment of transition" – if we keep in mind the extensive import of a doctrine of "representative words" in the second half of

the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century. This doctrine was not only meant to provide the words to representatively talk about the newness of American experience, it was also meant to provide a focus to gauge the representativity of American experience. In other words: the country's very own "representative words" were taken to be instrumental in forming this American experience. As Thomas Gustafson argues in his seminal study on *Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language, 1776-1865*:

> "[T]he American quest for representative words can be considered to include not just attempts to guard or renovate worlds of the English language and the governing texts of America, but to change Americans themselves – to convert, reform, or inspire them – so that their actions would be guided by the Word of God or by the words of the Declaration and Constitution." (Gustafson 1992: 3)

The doctrine of "representative words" answers a number of efforts in the 18th century to establish a fixed vocabulary and language for America. These efforts were not merely academic – as was Dr. Samuel Johnson's efforts to remodel the English Language in the 1740s – but also undertook "to renew the words, to make them representative, to redeem their value, [in order that] people must perform anew the acts of liberty, revolution, sacrifice, brotherhood, and charity, underwritten by the rhetoric of America's first revolution" (Gustafson 1992: 3). This renewal of words, so Americans hoped, would eventually result in a vocabulary that was 'proper' only to citizens of America, a kind of 'jargon' spoken by a democratic people, representatively expressing their shared rituals and beliefs. The revolutionary spirit of the young nation, its alleged stepping out of the continuum of European history, called for a new language, for new tropes, or, at least, for old tropes turned. Consequently, the unsettling of the relationship between words and meanings, words and things and the resulting process of neologization was seen merely as a preliminary stage instrumental in fastening down an American dialect and vocabulary (Gustafson 1992: 301). It was, then, a process of neologization that should, eventually, restore the nexus of word and action that Americans insisted so much upon. This was also, as is widely known, the vital linguistic problem of the discussions about the Constitution: The revolutionary system of government, some argued, would also require a similarly 'revolutionized' political discourse, because the old terms 'aristocracy,' 'monarchy,' or even 'democracy' could no longer accommodate the 'meaning' of the new nation. This is why the framers of the new constitution quickly realized that the American project would need a radically new political lexicon to adequately represent the spirit of its revolutionary society. And indeed, as *Federalist No. 37* ("Concerning the Difficulties of the Convention in Devising a Proper Form of Government"), written by James Madison makes obvious, much of the struggles over the new constitution concerned this lack of suitable terms: "New ideas, such as presented by our novel and unique political system, must be expressed either by new words, or by old words with new

definitions" (Madison 1865: III, 435).[4] Thomas Jefferson, in a different context, makes a similar point: "The new circumstances under which we are placed call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects" (Jefferson 1984: 1295-6).

But America's obsession with its language and rhetoric was by no means over after the declaration of independence. Uncannily echoing the famous passage in Karl Marx's "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte" – "the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue" (Marx 1996: 15) – Walt Whitman acknowledges that America's revolution will not be complete until its people are fluent in a novel tongue. Whitman himself revisits the doctrine of "representative words" in his *American Primer*:

> "In America an immense number of new words are needed, to embody the new political facts, the compact of the Declaration of Independence, and of the Constitution – the union of States – the new States – the Congress – the modes of election – the stump speech – the ways of electioneering – addressing the people – stating all that is to be said in modes that fit the life and experience of the Indianian, the Michiganian, the Vermonter, the men of Maine – also words to answer the modern, rapidly spreading, faith, of the vital equality of women with men, and that they are to be placed on an exact plane, politically, socially, and in business, with men." (Whitman 1904: 6)

Whitman argues for a spirit of continual experimentation in which the developing, provisional state of language equals the improvised state of the union and its culture. Only by pressing onward and beyond the canon or lexicon of inherited denominations and representations, Whitman argues, will it possible to "give the spirit, the body, the man, new words, new potentialities of speech" (Whitman 1904: 6). The process, as Whitman conceives of it, is both endless and circular: The new "potentialities of speech" engendering new circumstances, new "political facts," that will then again call for new words. For Emerson, Whitman, and other nineteenth-century writers, this potential inexhaustibility (*Unabgeschlossenheit*) and continual self-affection of America's signification is nothing but the mark and guarantee of its democratic promise: New political realities will here be reflected in a change in the political lexicon and this change will potentially bring about further progress that will then again cause for an extended and revised vocabulary. America's poetic self-affection consequently gives birth to a process of revision that continually posits its own origin.

As Gustafson argues, the process of neologization in fact became one of the early focal points for the discussions around the development of the republic: "Neologization and the transfer of old words to new objects became synonymous with America. The two linguistic processes throve in a world of invention,

4 Madison also discusses the problem of the political lexicon of the United States in Madison 1865: III, 519.

discovery, and social change – the world of democracy, the world of the frontier" (Gustafson 1992: 302). But because this also meant that there was no bedrock foundation for America, it wasn't long before some Americans grew anxious about the advance of America's linguistic makeover. The framers themselves had not been overly concerned about the process of neologization. As Jefferson remarks: "I am no friend [...] to what is called *Purism*, but a zealous one to the Neology which has introduced these two words without the authority of any dictionary. I consider the one as destroying the nerve and beauty of language, while the other improves both, and adds to its copiousness" (Jefferson and Peterson 1984: 1295). And in 1816, in a letter to Joseph Milligan, he may see the possibility of what he calls "uncouth words" but he argues that "the public will judge them," and, therefore, no artificial restrictions (i.e. standardizations, norms, etc.) need to control the emergence of new words (Jefferson 1905: XIV, 464).

Soon, however, many thought that the proliferation of new words was to endanger *common sense*. William Fowler, a professor of rhetoric and oratory at Amherst, would argue in 1851 in his *English Language in its Elements and Forms* that "[i]n this country, in this 'wilderness of free minds,' new thoughts and correspondingly new expressions spring up spontaneously to live their hour or to be permanent" (Fowler 1851: xii).[5] Some thought this "wilderness of free minds" to be a mixed blessing, if not a danger. Fowler himself, concerned that the process of neologization might be running out of hand, wrote the first American textbook of English grammar to be used in colleges. As they "spread westward" and "in the use of their liberty," Fowler worried, Americans would "break loose from the laws of language, and become marked not only by one, but by a thousand Shibboleths" (Fowler 1851: xii). Fowler and others grew anxious about a declension of language if new words were not sanctioned by the learned elite, and soon, the criticism of Dr. Johnson's and the King's English standardizing influence is replaced by demands for a standardization of the republicanized language.

But the discussions around neologization also made Americans especially aware of the power and potential of language and rhetoric. The large number of spellers, grammars, and dictionaries that the revolutionary generation published may serve as a reminder that this was not merely the leisurely pursuit of the learned elite. But once the potential for radical linguistic renovation had become unearthed, once the American lexicon had been extended and the grammar had been changed, many feared that a process of linguistic *corruption* would necessarily ensue and lead to a deterioration of *common sense*. This anxiety about the linguistic development of the republic finds its expression also in the literature of the period. There is a memorable scene in Washington Irving's "Rip van Winkle,"

5 See H. L. Mencken's introduction to his *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States* (1980) for an early overview of the discussion among American philologist about the state of the American language.

when Rip, after the revolution, awakens to a "singularly metamorphosed" landscape and, upon entering the village, observes that "[t]he very character of the people seemed changed" (Irving 1983: 779). But Rip is especially puzzled by the "Babylonish jargon" that he hears in his town: "[R]ights of citizens – election – members of congress – liberty – Bunker's hill – heroes of seventy-six [...]" (Irving and Tuttleton 1983: 779). If Irving's account makes fun of the anxieties over a denigration of the American dialect, it nevertheless identifies a dilemma implicit in the rapid development of the American language. Irving's point is not simply that, because Rip has slept for twenty years, he cannot connect elements of the new political jargon with the respective historical events. Rather, Irving is interested in the way in which the linguistic development brought about by the revolution has disbanded the bonds of community and communication. Irving's ironic vision is of an America in which the 'national' dialects become so diverse to in fact prevent efficient communication among the community: linguistic change, assumed to shape American identity in the first place, has now exploded the hopes for a united community.

Clearly, Irving's highly ironic and detached stance *vis-à-vis* the linguistic makeover of the republic was an exception. But there were other disturbed surveyors of the American penchant for linguistic innovation. Among them Alexis de Tocqueville, who found the United States' laissez-faire politics with regards to language deeply unsettling. This American desire for linguistic innovation so unnerves Tocqueville that, in the second volume of *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville 2004), he devotes an entire chapter to the topic: "How American Democracy has Changed the English Language" (Tocqueville 2004 547-553). The source of this innovation, according to Tocqueville, are constant agitation due to competition, the American love of "change for its own sake" (Tocqueville 2004: 548), and the Americans' general ignorance of classical languages: "Men who live in democratic countries have little notion of the languages spoken in Rome and Athens" (Tocqueville 2004: 549). Tocqueville, very much like Fowler, castigates that Americans "become used to employing words indiscriminately" and argues that in America, "[t]he rules laid down by style are all but abolished: Seldom does one encounter expressions that seem, by their very nature, either vulgar or refined." The result, as Tocqueville argues, is that "the origins of words are lost, like the origins of men, and confusion develops in language as in society" (Tocqueville 2004: 551). Tocqueville, the aristocrat, finds the mutual mobility of people and words equally disturbing.

Tocqueville is especially interesting in our context because he himself connects the question of linguistic innovation with that of America's "transitory" or "unsettling situation" (in the French original, the phrase is "situation ambulatoire"). Because their "situation is constantly changing", Tocqueville argues, Americans "make the expression more rapid and the idea less clear." And he adds that

"[w]hen it comes to language [...] democratic people prefer obscurity to effort" (Tocqueville 2004: 553). Tocqueville negatively assesses this as the "unfortunate consequence of democracy" (Tocqueville 2004: 550) and sees no potential for improvement as Americans "rely on their own unaided intelligence" (Tocqueville 2004: 553). No wonder then that Tocqueville's assessment is a rather harsh one:

> "Men who live in democratic countries will therefore often have vacillating ideas, they need very broad expressions to contain them. Since they never know whether the idea to which they are giving voice today will fit the new situation in which they may find themselves tomorrow, they naturally develop a taste for abstract ideas. An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: you can put in any ideas you please and take them out again without anyone being the wiser." (Tocqueville 2004: 553)

Like Emerson, Tocqueville associates America's linguistic condition with the political situation of being in transition. But for Tocqueville, it is precisely the fact that America has not yet arrived at its final destination that explains what he see as the linguistic deficiencies of the young nation. The country is in a changing state, Tocqueville asserts, and this is why its words essentially unfixed:

> "An author begins by slightly bending the original meaning of a known expression, and, having altered it in this way, he does his best to adapt it to his subject. Another author comes along and bends the meaning in another direction. A third takes it down yet another path, and since there is no common arbiter, no permanent tribunal that can fix the meaning of the word once and for all, it remains in a state of transition." (*DiA*, 550)[6]

Tocqueville's aristocratic defamation of the republican dialect as transitional and unsettled is not to go away because he has already identified an element of unrest in his study that he takes to be the central characteristic of American democracy. But Tocqueville is not alone with his perplexity over the indeterminacy of words in America. The evolution of an American dialect led to violent efforts against all formal differentiation of English and American not simply by observes from outside the United States. The pioneer(ing) dictionary of Americanisms, John Pickering's *Vocabulary or Collection of Words and Phrases which Have Been Supposed to be Peculiar to the United States of America* (Pickering 1816), the work of a Massachusetts lawyer, was harshly criticised and seen to be utterly inappropriate. Even Noah Webster, who was later to publish what became the standard American dictionary, saw no use for it (see Mencken 1980: 8). Most of the American philologists of the early days – Witherspoon, Pickering, Worcester, Fowler, Cobb, de Vere and others – were stubborn advocates of conformity, and challenged all indications of a national independence in speech. Fowler, for example, proposed

6 I have slightly changed Arthur Goldhammer's translation in order to reflect Tocqueville's identification of an element of transitionality in America's linguistic and national 'makeup'. In the original, the passage reads: "Un auteur commence par détourner quelque peu une expression connue de son sens primitif, et, après l'avoir ainsi modifiée, il l'adapte de son mieux à son sujet. Un autre survient qui attire la signification d'un autre côté ; un troisième l'entraîne avec lui dans une nouvelle route ; et, comme il n'y a point d'arbitre commun, point de tribunal permanent qui puisse fixer définitivement le sens du mot, celui-ci reste dans une situation ambulatoire" (Tocqueville 1840: 128).

harsh measures when he argued that all "Americanisms are foreign words and should be so treated" (see Mencken 1980:33).

Significantly enough, then, the politicians' call for a regulation of an unrestrained individualism an their attempts at limitating the power of the majority is echoed by the early philologists' call for a control of linguistic freedom and of the advancement of popular dialects (Mencken 1980; Gustafson 1992). Very much like Tocqueville, early American philologists are anxious about the indeterminacy of American speech and about the characteristic vagueness of American political discourse – terms such as *the American people*, *democracy*, and *free government* were, after all, still contested territory. Later attempts at defining an American vocabulary, culminating in Noah Webster's dictionary, therefore found their focus in fixing "loose definitions" (Gustafson 1992: 322) and in defining the words that had led to such a controversy during the process of framing the constitution. But the unease about American speech was there to remain and soon become a commonplace in the political discourse of Emerson's time. As Gustafson argues:

> "The connection Webster made so often in his career between political and linguistic disorders had become in the 1830s a political axiom, and American political debate in these years was preoccupied with the problem of settling the meanings of words or countering their force" (Gustafson 1992: 323)

For some, however, the "transitional state" of words and the indeterminacy of American political liturgy was a potential rather than a shortcoming. To them, the very flexibility of words in America left room for changes and for the continual work of interpreting its politics. It made obvious that any given political fixture of words (for example in the constitution) was only the expression of a particular time and had to be amended continually in order to fit the needs of present and future generations. Thomas Jefferson, for example, clearly belonged to the faction of those willing to make amendments when he comments on the inception of the "Declaration of Independence" and the "Virginia State Constitution" in a letter to Henry Lee on May 8, 1825, that "all its [the declaration's] authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc." (Jefferson 1944: 719). Texts, as Jefferson's argument goes, especially those texts that found a nation, are only expressions of a harmonization of the sentiments of the day, nothing more, and they will have to be amended in order to reflect the sentiments of a future generation. If there is no room for such amendments, they will inevitably loose their authority. Jefferson's comment, made a few decades after the Declaration of Independence and when it was already obvious that the declaration would become a sort of political orthodoxy, was directed against a kind of textual absolutism that saw the Declaration of Independence as a timeless document that was valid unalterably for all future American generations. In her study on the process of revision and

review that went into the making of the Declaration of Independence, *The Declaration of Independence: The Evolution of the Text*, Julian P. Body has shown that even as a document "harmonizing [the] sentiments of the day," to use Jefferson's words, the Declaration was far from unproblematic. From the "original rough draft" to the declaration as we know it, the document was revised significantly and by a number of different contributors. Therefore, its inception was less the ingenious accomplishment of a single man but the collaborative effort of many. At the same time, it is thus not so much the representative expression of a representative mind of the era, but, rather, a highly contested compromise, a text countlessly revised and rewritten. So again, whenever we look at the textual origins of the American nation, we encounter a textual network that is marked by its very own complexity, marked by its exhibition of textuality insofar as it draws our attention to the ways in which its function as a textual origin is complicated by its textual complexity.[7]

Maybe it is precisely because Americans knew all along about the fragility of their political origins and the potential instability of the (textual) compromise established by the Declaration of Independence, that they insisted so much on a union of words and things. But it is certainly true, as Gustafson argues, that the Declaration of Independence was thought to re-establish the "equivalence between words and things, speech and action, definition and political decision," that then was thought to have become "an American fact of life the moment the states ratified the Constitution. In America, the written law is a king[…]" (Gustafson 1992: 324). But after the compromise had held for a couple of decades, it began to be severely criticized in Emerson's time. The debate was started in the 1830 with Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun furiously disputing the meaning of the constitution, but it finally came to a head in the constitutional crisis in the early 1850s (see Gustafson 1992: 323f.). Many now considered a degradation of the correspondence between word and things the cause for an increasing 'rottenness' not only of American language but of American culture in general. They believed that the business of protecting assent through language and writing had finally failed and needed to be reinstituted by an authoritarian gesture.

Again, we see echoes of this discussion in the literature of the period. The diverse dialects of the "Isolatoes" spoken on board of the Pequod in *Moby-Dick* are to be read as Melville's commentary on the constitutional crisis of the early 1850s. The Pequod reproduces a situation in which American language had rapidly developed into a set of mutually exclusive idioms. The loss of a correspondence of things and words for many also meant that the United States' authentic promise –

7 On the complicated textual history of the Constitution, see also Pauline Maier's *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (1997) and Garry Will's *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (1979). On some of the rhetorical problems implied by the Declaration, see Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence Jefferson. Natural Language & the Culture of Performance* (1993).

that it was a nation founded upon a Declaration of Independence and a Constitution based in the people's ideas, nature, and God – was jeopardized (Gustafson 1992: 348ff.). Above all else, the crisis made obvious that the meaning of the 'Constitution' as well as the meaning of 'America' was no longer perceived to be self-evident or self-explanatory. As Gustafson points out, this period saw the Constitution as "the epitome of an open-ended text subject to the politics of interpretation" (Gustafson 1992: 326).

Even if the efforts at fixing the meaning of the constitution and establishing a commonly sanctioned rhetoric and ideology for America's social and political life were not or could not be successful, they did still produce an insight whose importance cannot be overestimated: the early republic's debates circling around rhetorical questions and dilemmas made Americans deeply aware that the rituals of consensus promised by a common language were deeply problematic (see Brown 1989; Warner 1990; Fliegelman 1993; Davidson 2004). The insistence on a commonly sanctioned rhetoric made many, as Gustafson argues, "question [...] that rhetoric or the uses to which it has been put by confidence men, demagogues, Indian haters, slave masters, lawyers, presidents, ministers, and other members of the word-slinging class" (Gustafson 1992: 4). And, as Gustafson points out, we can find this dissenting discourse, this counterjargon, in many seminal literary texts of the nineteenth century, for example in "the dialect of Huck Finn" or the "polyphonic oratory of reality of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Moby-Dick*" (Gustafson 1992: 4). To make Gustafson's point somewhat stronger: in America, one could argue, literature develops precisely in this place of a counterjargon, as a mode of examining the limits of common sense diction and of experimenting with the potential of a language that has become unsettled.

When Emerson argues for an such unsettling of language, then his comments must be read as a response to the discussions surrounding the question of "representative words" in America. A telling instance of Emerson's reappropriation of the contemporary debate can be found in his late essay on "Eloquence." Here, Emerson quotes from Dr. Samuel Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare":

> "There is in every nation a style which never becomes obsolete, a certain mode of phraseology so consonant to the analogy and principles of respective language as to remain settled and unaltered. This style is to be sought in the common intercourse of life among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance. The polite are always catching modish innovations, and the learned forsake the vulgar,

> when the vulgar is right; but there is a conversation above grossness and below refinement, where propriety resides." (*W*, VIII, 125-126) [8]

But, as Emerson comments, the "style" and "conversation" of "propriety" is only a "gymnastics," it is destined to remain "an education of eloquence" (*W*, VIII, 126) because it does not have a "beautiful and prodigious surprise in it" (*W*, VIII, 111). Emerson, however, is interested precisely in a moment of poetic troping, a moment in which we are "surprised out of our propriety" (*W*, II, 321), where styles become obsolete and where "phraseologies" that once were "consonant" with common diction become defamiliarized. Just as Whitman obsesses with America's "loud, ill-pitch'd voice" (Whitman 1996: 1017), Emerson imagines a point where the representativity of a given use of language is disturbed, unsettled, or even lost. If the founding of the American republic thus roughly coincides with what Michel Foucault, in the *Order of Things*, has described as the epistemic rupture of 1800, then its advent will also be marked by a crisis of representation that, for Foucault, symptomatically marks the waning of classicism and the advent of modernity (Foucault 1973: xii). This is not meant to suggest that America is merely to be localized in the historical epoch of that crisis of representation. Rather, and more specifically, 'America' is precisely another name for this crisis of representation. Because the crisis of representation is especially virulent in a context in which national culture is essentially a culture of words, that is, where national culture is precisely the continual transmission and renewal of a canon of founding texts, 'America' is its own second order observer, it becomes implied in a recursive structure where the description of 'America' brings about and guarantees its existence. For Emerson, 'America,' as a nation and as a cultural concept, is an answer to this crisis of representativity. It acknowledges that the textual re-presentation of what we are, always already means that we have lost "our propriety," that we have always already departed from representativity, from the *Eigentlichkeit* of our words. Instead of a representative origin, instead of a stable genealogy, America is all about this hybrid origin, receiving the full potential of a linguistic freedom implied by this crisis of representation.

The discussion circling around the doctrine of the representativity of words forms an important background to Emerson's writing. Emerson is certainly aware of the debates about the meaning of American political liturgy and, as a writer

8 The original passage is from Samuel Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare" and reads as follows: "If there be, what I believe there is, in every nation, a style which never becomes obsolete, a certain mode of phraseology so consonant and congenial to the analogy and principles of its respective language, as to remain settled and unaltered; this style is probably to be sought in the common intercourse of life, among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance. The polite are always catching modish innovations, and the learned depart from established forms of speech, in hope of finding or making better; those who wish for distinction forsake the vulgar, when the vulgar is right; but there is a conversation above grossness, and below refinement, where propriety resides, and where this poet seems to have gathered his comic dialogue. He is therefore more agreeable to the ears of the present age than any other author equally remote, and among his other excellencies deserves to be studied as one of the original masters of our language" (qtd. from Allen et al. 1962: 76).

heavily dependant upon the Lyceum's sponsorship, these debates also had practical ruminations for him. Like other orators engaged in the mass education project of lecturing the public at the time, he complements these disputes with an interest in questions of rhetorical performance, of speech and, especially, of eloquence. The Unitarian sermon had already come a long way from the so-called Puritan 'plain style'. Daniel Howe has remarked how much the "sparse utilitarianism" of the Puritan-style sermon had been replaced by a "graceful sentimentality" in the Unitarian sermon: "In fact, could the Puritans have heard a nineteenth-century Unitarian sermon, they would probably have found its style similar to the flowery 'carnall eloquence' they detested in Anglican preachers" (Howe 1988: 197). The American Puritan ministry had always been skeptical of figurative language and verbal artistry (see Bercovitch 1994: 226-254). When John Cotton published a new translation of the Psalms in 1640 – *The Whole Book of Psalms Faithfully Translated into English Meter* (also known as *The Bay Psalm Book*) – it was meant to replace what had been considered an overly figurative and playful translation used by the Anglicans. Cotton, in his preface, can be quoted as an example of how Puritans tended to disapprove of figurative language:

> "Neither let any think, that for the meter's sake we have taken liberty or poetical license to depart from the true and proper sense of David's words in the Hebrew verses; no; but it hath been one part of our religious care and faithful endeavor to keep close to the original text. [...] If therefore the verses are not always so smooth and elegant as some may desire or expect; let them consider that God's Altar needs not our polishings." (qtd. in Bercovitch and Patell 1994: 227)

Obviously, this strong rejection of the figurative and a preference for plainness and literalism is ideologically significant, since language inevitably contains figurative elements. In fact, research into early American literature has shown that Puritan writing itself was highly figurative – not lest of all because it is highly allusive and containing references to not only the bible, but also to Ovid, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, and other classical authors. Also, Puritan rhetoric is, essentially, a "conversion rhetoric" that attempts to bring about an experience of conversion as the essence of Puritan religious life (see Caldwell 1983). Emerson "recapitulates," as Alan D. Hodder correctly points out, "the constructional schemes and strategies of Puritan conversion rhetoric" (Hodder 1991: 428). But he reappropriates Puritan doctrine by suggesting that it is precisely the *turning* or *troping* power of poetic words that bring about this conversion. As Hodder argues: "[P]art of what is crucial about the term 'conversion' to Emerson is the troping (τρσποζ – 'turning') that it authorizes, its sanction for his own program of literary turns and conversion" (Hodder 1991: 432).

Emerson's notion of eloquence thus assumes that there is a moment when the performance of words effects a moment of conversion in which not just the speaker or the audience, but the world itself is changed. This conversion in Emerson rhetorics or poetics comes as a moment of figurative language, as a

moment of an incalculable rhetoricity or poeticity that changes both the speaker and the listener, the writer and the reader. This dependence on the performativity of words and of public oratory is also strong elsewhere in American culture and Politics. Jay Fliegelman has shown in his study on *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* that it is a central corner post of the American amalgamization of politics and rhetorics in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Fliegelman 1993). It assumes that a moment of conversion guaranteed by the performativity of figurative language presents a possibility to establish a simultaneity between processes of language and their context in ordinary life. Words, for Emerson, have the power to make something happen not only in language, but also in the audience or the reader.

There is a constant tinkering in Emerson between the two poles of a Puritan plain style and the demands of the orator. In his writing, the doctrine of an equivalence of words and things finds a strong echo. In the journal, Emerson notes that "[i]n good writing words become one with things" (*J*, II, 401). But alongside this interest – and as he becomes more and more engaged with the seventeenth-century prose masters Donne, Jonson, Bacon, and Browne – he questions his own goal of "put[ting] on eloquence as a robe" (*J*, I, 367) and strives to stripe away rhetorical decorum in favour of simplicity. Upon reading *Sartor Resartus* in 1834, Emerson expresses his incredulity at Carlyle's "grotesque teutonic apocalyptic" style (*CEC*, 99) and says that he "look[s] for the hour with impatience when the vehicle will be worthy of the spirit when the word will be as simple & so as resistless as the thought, & in short, when your words will be one with things" (*CEC*, 99).

Only a year later, however, we find Emerson's position reverted when he realizes that the perfect blending of word and thing may not be possible after all and that a distance between the two is itself the source of the power of rhetoric or poetry:

> "There is every degree of remoteness from the line of things in the line of words. By and by comes a word true and closely embracing the thing. […] The aim of the author is not to tell truth – that he cannot do, but to suggest it. He has only approximated it himself, & hence his cumbrous and embarrassed speech: he uses many words, hoping that on, if another, will bring you as near to the fact as he is. For language itself is young & unformed. In heaven, it will be […] 'one with things.' Now, there are many things that refuse to be recorded, – perhaps the larger half. The unsaid part is the best of every discourse." (*J*, III, 491-2)

The entry in Emerson's journal is obviously an implicit fling at the rhetorics of Webster and others for whom 'Americanness' was located in precisely an equivalence of word and things. By the time *Nature* is published in 1836, Emerson's view that language is necessarily distant both from things and truth gives way to a more aggressive hostility: Words, he argues, "cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it" (*W*, I, 45). If you carefully use and define your words, as implied by the different projects attempting to sanitize the American dialect, this will still not lead you closer to

truth. The writer who excessively qualifies and defines, ends in an "Iceland of negations" (*W*, I, 354). It is this fundamental rejection of the doctrine of the equivalence of words and things that forms a focal point of Emerson's poetics. Here, the American project of a unison between words and things, the attempt to make words correspond to things, is rejected in favour of what Emerson calls a rhetorical "violence of direction" (*W*, III, 185). He urges American writers to "omit all negative propositions" (*W*, VII, 309) and asks for their commitment to a specifically rhetorical *Eigensinn*: Instead of calling for a reestablishment of the equivalence of words and things for an American political liturgy, Emerson wants writers to commit to processes that are specifically rhetoric or poetic, not bound by the dogma of 'representativity'. The resulting maxim of ""[w]e aim above the mark to hit the mark" (*W*, III, 185) already makes explicit how much Emerson wants the American writer to invest in rhetorics, that is, in the movements of troping and figurality.

The result is, as Barbara Packer has pointed out, "[a] style that suggests rather than tells, that refuses to defend," and "that combines excess with reticence" (Packer 1982: 5). Emerson is however well aware his style carries its very own danger, namely that of being "misunderstood". He nevertheless insists:

> "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. – 'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.' – Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood." (*W*, II, 57)

The misunderstanding that Emerson describes is a result of the radical contemporariness and occasionality of the words uttered at any given moment. "To-morrow" already, they will no longer be understood. Of course it is this kind of rejection of the standard forms of argument (typology, etc.), together with his refusal to qualify, to define, and to more explicitly explain assertions made in the essays that quickly made Emerson's reputation as an antinomian. But for Emerson, the danger of misinterpretation is negligible when compared to the danger for words to become a "paper currency" (*W*, I, 30), as he argues in *Nature*. This is why he will later define the potential illegibility of a text as a mark of its superior quality. As Packer points out: "Obscurities, enigmas, lacunae – like Biblical parables – are tests of the reader's intelligence and generosity; [...] The reader can hear only those texts, or portions of texts, for which he has ears" (Packer 1982: 6).

Furthermore, Emerson's disregard of the conventions of nineteenth-century philosophical writing directly involve the reader in the production of the text. If the standards of the philosophical treatise and the conventions of popular essayistic style in the Lyceum tradition were meant to facilitate the reader's understanding of

a text or lecture, then Emerson's abrupt transitions and argumentative inconsistencies call on the reader to fill in the gaps.

But Emerson's stylistic revolution does not just pertain to the level of textual conventions. The most remarkable feature of Emerson's style is the way it dissolves connections between paragraphs and, even, between sentences. This makes for its characteristic vagueness: often his topic sentences can be read in more ways than one, and we have to provide a tone or dramatic context. Consequently, Emerson's prose stages a veritable drama of eloquence and oratory, but it forsakes the situationist context that would supply the correct tone. It is not just that we lack the sound of Emerson's Lyceum-trained baritone. This indeterminacy of tone is deliberate, even tough it is something that only the written text can sustain. Although Emerson's writing could only develop in a culture of practiced oratory, it anticipates Thoreau's more decisive renunciation of spoken discourse in favour of writing. I think that Packer is wrong to point out that Emerson's texts belong "to the oral, not the written, tradition" (Packer 1982: 8). Certainly the influence of the "plenoloquence" of popular oratorical style is clearly visible in Emerson's writing, but his exploration of stylistic possibilities remains contingent on the potential of written discourse for indeterminacy. And it is of course precisely the lack of the situationist context that guarantees the text's potential for multi-accentuality. This openness is both the promise and the peril of the American text.

Emerson could be certain that his readers, well trained as attentive listeners by the Lyceum, would recognize a great number of registers or 'voiced' styles – cadences of King James' bible, the sermon style, passages in the register of the philosophical treatise (Packer 1982: 8) – as well as recognizable persona – the cold empiricist, the quiet and patient rationalist explaining something to an imaginary interlocutor, the furious demagogue, the fervent preacher, etc. But Emerson chooses to superimpose these styles, he multi-layers them in order to challenge their expectations by defamiliarizing acquired reading and listening practices, in order to, in his own words, "shock" his readers and listeners "out of all patience" (*J*, V, 83). And much like the style of his successor Nietzsche, Emerson presents us with a specific difficulty that can be described in terms of irony. Just as with the stock character of the *eiron* in Greek comedy, whose pretension of stupidity masks a higher intelligence and thus lets the audience question his ambitions, the multi-layering of 'voiced' styles in Emerson's essays effects a certain understatement by means of which our safe grip on a text, our 'automatic' reconstruction of its 'ordinary' situation, and our 'patient' comprehension is called into question. The elusiveness of Emerson's oratory or writerly styles – how they become indeterminate at the very moment that we think we have recognized a characteristic style – then is a structural principle that functions along the lines of irony. It undermines the certainty of the reader or listener in the text that he hears or reads. Closer to Emerson, Friedrich Schlegel suggested in his

definition of irony in his *Aphorisms* that irony speaks of the "Unmöglichkeit [...] einer vollständigen Mitteilung" (Schlegel 1959: II, 160). Schlegel's insight, I think, is applicable to Emerson's poetics since, like irony, his multi-layered style leads to an awareness of a certain discrepancy or even incongruity between words and their meaning, between the orator's discourse and its situationist context. It makes us aware that the text is not merely a transparent medium of communication but that it is itself in production and that we, as readers, play a part in this production.[9]

Emerson style, however, his complication of established forms of eloquence and oratory earned him a great deal of criticism both on the Lyceum cycle as well as at Harvard. The "Divinity School Address", delivered in the "refulgent summer" (*W*, I, 119) of 1838 to the senior class of the school is a case in point. Emerson's address caused a major commotion at Harvard and got him barred from what was then the Cambridge Theological School. That he refused to enter into a public dispute with his critics even after the publication of the address further caused furious reactions. Emerson himself preferred to call the discussion, in a letter to Carlyle on October 17, 1838, a "storm in our washbowl" (*CEC*, 99). And indeed, as we read the Address today, it seems hard to see why it would have caused such excitement, after all, the argument of the Address was geared towards the young students at Harvard and pretty uncontroversial at that. In order to understand the reaction to the Address, then, we need not concern ourselves with its content, but rather with its challenge to conventionalized ways of rhetorical presentation. Emerson does not write in the prose style that characterizes the treatises of his day. He introduces a decisive poetic touch, later to become the trademark of his style, and it was precisely his decision to favour a poetic style over plain style oratory that explains the angry protest of his contemporaries.

Emerson's critics reproached him for his penchant for "lofty ideas" and "beautiful images of spiritual life." Also, the ministers at Harvard reprimand him for his refusal to attribute personality to God ("the soul knows no persons"), something that to them came close to a dangerous "pantheism" (*L*, II, 146-50). For an audience that was accustomed to the condensed diction of New England Puritan typology, sentences such as the following certainly struck an unusual chord:

> "This sentiment is divine and deifying. It is the beatitude of man. It makes him illimitable. [...] Wherever a man comes, there comes revolution. [...] When a man comes, all books are legible, all things transparent, all religions are forms. [...] Man is the wonderworker. He is seen amid miracles. [...] He saith yea and nay, only. [...] He speaketh, not spake. O my friends, there are resources in us on which we have not drawn. There are men who rise refreshed on hearing a threat; men to whom a crisis

9 Emerson – via Carlyle, who had written an essay about Novalis in 1829 (Carlyle 1904, II, 1 - 55) – would have been familiar with the theory of irony in German Romanticism. On irony, see Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975: 154 and 178-187) and Wayne C. Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), the classic study on irony and Romanticism is Cleanth Brooks' "Irony as a Principle of Structure" (Zabel 1951: 729–741).

> which intimidates and paralyzes the majority [...] comes graceful and beloved as a bride." (*W*, I, 122-129)

Emerson consistently overstates and attempts to make his statements more indeterminate. Emerson, in a letter to Henry Ware Jr. explaining his motives for the Divinity School Address, confesses his "incapacity of methodical writing" and characterizes himself as "a chartered libertine [...] free to rail" (*L*, II, 167-67). Emerson was aware that this would cause a stir and, in hindsight, refuses to enter into a process of explanation or differentiation. "I could not give account of myself if challenged. [...] I don't know what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought" (*L*, II, 167-67). Rather, a passage in his journal makes obvious, that Emerson's tendency for overstatement and indeterminacy – and, therefore, his rejection of the doctrine of representative words – was a premeditated choice: "[W]hilst I see this that you must have been shocked & must cry out at what I have said I see too that we cannot easily be reconciled for I have a great deal more to say that will shock you out of patience" (*J*, V, 83). Emerson's statements in the context of the address to Divinity School thus form a first tentative outline of his poetological programme. The "rottenness" of Emerson's "rotten diction" (*W*, I, 30), his refutation of the conventions of typological writing, as well as his faible for "shocking" his readers out of their patience by means of saying precisely that which his readers do not expect: these are the rhetorical strategies that in Emerson challenge the standards of "representativity" in order to unsettle a linguistic or poetic potential that, for him, is the potential of language in America.

Two passages – one taken from his *Journals*, the other from "Circles" – make it apparent just how much Emerson's style is the result of a series of careful and apparently conscious stylistic and editorial decisions. Here, indeterminacy is not simply a contingency of Emerson's style of writing, rather, it is 'determinate' because it is the result of a careful layering of different registers and because it is produced by means of a laborious editorial process. When adapting a passage out of his journal in "Circles," Emerson chooses to make its meanings more indeterminate by editing out the sources that were included in his notes:

> "And thus, o circular philosopher, you have arrived at a fine Pyrrhonism, at an equivalence & indifferency of all actions & would fain teach us that if we are true, forsooth, our crimes may be lively stones out of which we shall construct the temple of the true God. The good Swedenborg was aware, I believe, of this wonderful predominance & excess of the saccharine principle in nature & noticed that the hells were not without their extreme satisfactions" (*J*, V, 480).

In "Circles," the passage reads as follows:

> "I own I am gladdened by seeing the predominance of the saccharine principle throughout vegetable nature, and not less by beholding in morals that unrestrained inundation of the principle of good into every chink and hole that selfishness has left open, yea, into selfishness and sin itself; so that no evil is pure, nor hell itself without its extreme satisfactions" (*W*, II, 317-8).

By way of editing out direct references (to Swedenborg) and by way of completely stripping the passage's topic sentence (focusing on the notion of the "saccharine principle") of its rhetorical as well as explanatory or argumentative context, Emerson's diction here comes to contradict all conventions of typological argument. But, and that is the flip side of the coin here, this procedure is meant to redirect his readers' attention away from argumentative organization and towards rhetorical processes. Just notice, for example, the complex chiastic organization of "no evil is pure, nor hell itself without its extreme satisfactions." His challenge of the doctrine of "representative words" then is one that reintroduces a linguistic and rhetoric creativity where typology aimed for as much coherence and method as possible and tended to exorcise all remnants of a process of *poiesis*.

Emerson's famous aphorism in Nature that "[t]he corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language" (*W*, I, 29) has often been read out of its context in *Nature* and as a direct reference to John Locke's comments in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1990) on the "ill use of words" (476) and the "mischiefs of confounding the signification of words" (493). "[H]e that makes ill use of [language]" by using "obscure and equivocal terms, and insignificant and doubtful expressions," Locke argues in the *Essay*, "though he does not corrupt the fountains of knowledge, which are in things themselves, [...] does, as much as in him lies, break or stop the pipes, whereby it is distributed to the public use and advantage of mankind" (476). "Corruption" thus in Locke is caused by an unsettling of what is conceived to be a direct *rapport* between things and words. Emerson, in contrast, turns the argument on its head and does not locate "corruption" in an unsettling of the equivalence of words and things, as many of his contemporaries and followers of Locke's did. Whereas Locke and his American adherents saw themselves as part of a long tradition of writing that connected political disorders with a corruption of language, Emerson insists that it is precisely the absence of the poetic, the absence of language's potential for plurisignation, and its sedimentation into 'dead' or regimented forms that make for language's "rottenness" and, thereby, for America's present incapacity to express itself. For Emerson, it is when "new imagery ceases to be created," when "a paper currency is employed" that there is "no bullion in the vaults," that the "fraud is manifest," and "words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections" (*W*, I, 30). Emerson's essays and, particularly, *Nature* offer a "guidebook to reform," as Thomas Gustafson has phrased it (Gustafson 1992: 351): they establish a tradition of linguistic and rhetoric thought that takes its starting point in the linguistic concerns of the early republic but then radically depart from the doctrine of "representative words" to trace in America's "cumbrous and embarrassed speech" (*J*, III, 491) both its linguistic quandary as well as its poetic wisdom and promise.

Later, Emerson's groundbreaking insight will be taken up by other writers who share the conviction that all travesties of language are inherently democratic

because they relate to conventionalized linguistic customs in the same way as the individual relates to the community in America. The central figure of this antinomian tradition will be Walt Whitman with his fascination for America's "loud, ill-pitch'd voice, utterly regardless whether the verb agrees with the nominative" (Whitman 1996: 1017) and his assertion, in *An American Primer*, that a "perfect writer would make words sing, dance, kiss" (Whitman 1987: 7). But we also have more toned down versions of this, for example in what Malini Schueller has described as Thoreau's "carnival rhetoric and extra-vagance" (Schueller 1986). In literature's and poetry's "carnivalistic" potential for polysemy – in its "extra-vagant maneuver[s]", as Thoreau expresses it in *Walden* (Thoreau 2004: 324) – these writers find ways to loosen the grip of old conventions and challenge the assumptions of recent but already firmly established doctrines concerning the nature of language and texts. In an age obsessively concerned with making words a transparent means for establishing and perpetuating assent, these writers look into language's materiality, its rhetorical *Eigensinn,* to gauge both its dangers and promises. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, among others, all offer new definitions of language by way of a certain use of language, that is, they understand that any definition of language will itself be mutually implicated in its rhetorical presentation. The way in which language affects writing that affects language that affects writing, and so on, in Emerson's essays is precisely the way in which his texts are prepared to accept and investigate the full self-reflexive potential of language.

The present and facticity

Considering the scope and implications of Emerson's disclaimer of the doctrine of representative words, it is obvious that his argument concerning the "loose definitions" and the linguistic "obscurity" (Tocqueville) of American national diction is turned into a much more general one. It does no longer concern the meaning of the constitution or the potential of words to be representative. Emerson turns his contemporaries' inquiry into the equivalence of words and things into a more general examination of the meaning of 'America' itself. In other words: the nexus of word and action is here radically exposed in order to question the relationship of a name ('America') and an experience that carries that name ('America'). The issue, then, is no longer one of representativity – is the name equivalent to the experience? –, but rather the discovery of a hermeneutic riddle or circle in which the name both founds and challenges the reality or experience that it describes. 'America' for Emerson is thus precisely a movement of self-reflexivity, of a critical turning-upon-itself effected in language. And it is "only by coming again to themselves" (*W*, I, 132), as Emerson describes this self-reflexive move, that

Americans will be able to account for their situation. 'America' is thus the name for a hermeneutic situation or challenge, in which the place of enunciation, the locality of utterance, America, itself becomes the object of understanding. And, as we have seen before, this is what makes the present the scene of and endless progression of reinterpretations, where the need for a definition – of 'America' and of the 'American' experience – is continually both desired and deferred, promised and postponed. 'America' thus is all about reinterpretation, about a questioning of founding myths and of narratives that at any given irrepeatable moment specify the meaning of 'America'. One could argue, that from the very beginning, this paradox of self-implication is in fact the sign of America's modernity, both its threat as well as its cultural promise.

Again, this conundrum of making America present to itself, of founding America yet again, and of fulfilling the promise that 'America' designates for Emerson is always already a problem of poetic expression. As he states in "Poetry and Imagination":

> "To the poet the world is virgin soil; all is practicable [...]. He is a true re-commencer, or Adam in the garden again. He affirms the applicability of the ideal law to this moment and the present knot of affairs." (*W*, VIII, 19)

"To the poet, the world is virgin soil; all is practicable": this is how Emerson forefronts the question of writing and rhetorics. For him, the "representativity" of contemporary experience is not so much connected to the promise of a new world but to a promise that is mediated rhetorically, by way of the power of poetic words. With Emerson, the doctrine of representative words is turned upside down and what is now in question is the very representativity of our experience, and how it can be put into words. It is words that establish the contemporariness of our experience, and it is only the poet's words that manage to translate what we experience into representativity, that is, into an experience that stands in relation to the "spirit of the age", that, itself, is a result of a linguistic construction. Emerson consequently makes obvious something already implied by the doctrine of representative words but normalized and contained by its advocates because they place the precedent on things and not on words. In Emerson's critical reversal, however, it is words themselves that become part of experience. And it is the malleability of words in poetry that sustains an experience of freedom and, thus, of democracy.

Poetic words challenge hegemonic articulations of what we are and open the field for a rearticulation or resignification that changes us because it establishes another history, one that is irreducible to or discontinuous with the history we had before.[10] Poetry's power to overcome and to make us forget earlier articulations, enables it to create history anew in every instant. As a consequence, it lets us

10 On the logic of the "hegemonic articulation," see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001: 137).

redefine what we are by our acts of signification and resignification in a continual process of self-constitution that is always already a self-reflection. This is not a naive kind of presentism: Emerson is aware that in our desire to create the world anew with words – the poetic figuration of the "present knot of affairs" (*W*, VIII, 19)–, we cannot but pay tribute to our immense debt to the past. Even in our most original creations, this debt will be echoed to a certain measure. But Emerson also argues that art, "[b]ecause the soul is progressive [...] never quite repeats itself, but in every act attempts the production of a new and fairer whole," the aim of art is "not imitation but creation" (*W*, II, 351).

But how is it, given the immensity of our debt to the past, that we can at least to a certain degree evade the deadlock of tradition and create something new? Only by confronting the past, that is, by recirculating its terms in order to bring them into new differential relationships in which they will mean something radically different. Consequently we see in Emerson's writing an early imprint of what Paul Bové with regards to modern American poetry has called a "poetics of destruction" (Bové 1980). Emerson's poetics is "destructive" insofar as it breaks apart or loosens the hold of tradition by reappropriating its terms, by unsettling its sedimented forms, and by recirculating its words into new and unprecedented contexts. Emerson thus envisions a kind of writing that by engaging the tradition that goes before it both implicates itself in and potentially detaches itself from tradition. Overcoming the tradition in Emerson is thus a constant task and one that is never fulfilled. Rather, it is accomplished by way of an original quotation, that is, by way of an unsettling (or destruction) of the terms of tradition and their simultaneous rearrangement in the act of poetic figuration.

Because a poetics framed thus self-consciously will always itself be implied by its writing, it forms "a radically human and temporal, that is changing, event" (Bové 1980: 128). The poetic unsettling of words and sedimented forms is itself eventful, because it is not something that can be contained in a text once and for all. This unsettling can only be grasped in reading a text, that is, in the actual *Vollzug* of the text's rhetorical procedures and its potential for plurisignation. For Emerson, this propensity for self-implication as well as for the performance of an untapped poetic potential are, more generally, the meaning of the term 'America'. In other words: the definition of the reference of the signifier 'America' and the constant contestation of this reference in non-standard, unconventional, unrepresentative, or poetic reformulations is the event and reality of 'America'. The search for an American poetics, for an expression of America in a specifically American literature, is thus not merely engrafted on top of a more fundamental concern with the nature of the American experience. On the contrary: for Emerson, 'America' is, first and foremost, an investigation and experience of words. 'America' is grounded upon words and not upon a new found 'land,' 'ground,' or 'soil'.

It was Heidegger who, in the wake of Dilthey's hermeneutics and Nietzsche's experimental poetics of philosophy, first gave an elaborate account of this structure of the self-implication of understanding. In his pre-'*Kehre*' work on a *Hermeneutik der Faktizität* (*GA* 63), Heidegger carefully attempts to conceive of a process of understanding that generates its own ground or, rather, a method of understanding that, by virtue of being continually fed back into itself, produces its own facticity, a process that while it is being performed changes continually because understanding and its ground continually inflect each other. Just as Heidegger's radicalization of German philosophy's historicist and hermeneutic practices does no longer aspire for understanding to reach transcendence – the instalment of a master interpretation – so does Emerson's radicalization of American linguistic and rhetoric practices, in the sense of what he calls a "destructive liberalism," bring about a politics that ultimately has "no ulterior and divine ends" (*W*, III, 210).

Jacques Derrida, in his re-evaluation of Heidegger's hermeneutics, has been able to show that such a structure of self-implication means that we must always start exactly from "where we are".[11] Similarly, Emerson's 'hermeneutics' *avant la lettre* wants us to begin by asking: "Where do we find ourselves?" As a consequence, we realize, as Emerson remarks, that we "find ourselves on a stair," with "stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended," and "stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight" (*W*, III, 45). In other words: we begin by acknowledging what Heidegger has called the 'factical' situation, or, to use somewhat simpler terms, the 'fix' or 'embarrassment' of our present situation. This fix of our present moment is irreducible to the continuum of history. Even if we may see the stairs below and above us, any given present moment comes as an interruption of history. As Reinhart Koselleck has argued, such an experience of the discontinuity of the present moment is a general sign of modernity. It signals that the self-legitimizing function of history has been dissolved and that modernity has been "broken loose from an earlier form of time" (see Koselleck 1989: 46).

The self-reflection that Emerson's hermeneutics engenders, by cancelling the authority of an exemplary past, produces a moment "in the present, above time" (*W*, II, 67), a moment that with its conflicting temporalities signals America's modernity. America is always, as Emerson phrases it in "Circles," on the "verge of to-day" (*W*, II, 315), expecting the new while knowing that it comes as a risky cancellation of the past. This "verge," as a result of America's self-implication, is always both a promise and a threat. A promise, because it potentially enables a different future. A threat, because it means that we risk to lose the 'America' that we have grown accustomed to. Emerson's definition of America as being on the "verge" thus corresponds to what Heidegger has called a "Denken aus dem Ab-Grund": for Heidegger, the kind of thought produced by the *Kehre* or self-

11 On beginning "where we are," see Jacques Derrida's conversation with John D. Caputo in (Derrida et al. 1997: 160).

implication is *abgründig*, that is, both on the verge as well as producing its own ground (*Grund*). Such a self-reflexive move thus presents us with a double implication: it comes as an interruption of meaning, of sense, but at the same time, as the insistence that sense continues, that new sense is produced (see GA 66, 322).[12]

This may also explain why for Emerson, America's modernity does not necessarily have to be the source of a great national despair. Rather, like his successor Nietzsche, he joyously affirms this complication and debasement of tradition and locates in it the origin of a poetic "power" or "force" (*W*, III, 113) that returns the world to us, albeit in a different, necessarily unprecedented shape. This is also why Bové is correct to point out that the stance of a destructive poetics, as he argues with regards to Whitman, is never one of a radical ahistoricism or even nihilism: rather, it calls for a turning of tradition against itself, for a turning of the tropes that make up that tradition in order to tap into a (poetic, political, etc.) potential the tradition has concealed so far. Emerson consequently does not envision a naïve return to the Adamic theory of 'America': he believes that it is only by way of a careful investigation of the words of the tradition that we can disclose a different meaning of 'America'. Such a destructive poetics can, however, never be 'programmatic,' since such a turning of the tropes of tradition always happens in a present moment that is, historically speaking, contingent or irreversible. In "Quotation and Originality," Emerson uses the metaphor of the snowflake to illustrate this irreducibility of history:

> "Old and new put their stamp to everything in Nature. The snowflake that is now falling is marked by both. The present moment gives the motion and the color of the flake, Antiquity its form and properties. All things wear a lustre which is the gift of the present, and a tarnish of time" (*W*, VIII, 175).

By way of quoting the textual origins of America, Emerson consequently proposes a reflexivization, a *turning* and *troping* of the tradition so that the quotation will produce yet another 'original' refiguration (new linguistic arrangements, new meanings, etc.).

Emerson here echoes the conceptual revolution that was brought about by the Romantics – for example by Schlegel, to name just one important exponent. Schlegel and other romantics speculated about how the work of art could serve as a medium to present that which ineffable or unrepresentable. *Reflexion*, the romantics' term for this kind of self-implication (see Götze 2001: 218ff.) leads to a "poetics of a poetics" (Schlegel, KA II, 204; Nr. 238) because the formation of its theory does not happen, as in philosophy, externally, but rather in poetic representation or poetic *Darstellung* itself. Similarly, the way in which America linguistically expresses itself is not simply an external means of depicting a

12 On Heidegger's double definition of the *Kehre* as both as a rupture ("Bruch") as well as an overcoming ("Verwindung"), see (Jahraus 2004: 170).

specifically American experience, rather, it is the text of America itself (its conflicting discourses, its poetic uses of words) that generates an experience that is specifically American. Lacking an external support, lacking something that is unquestioningly American, it has to repeat its self-description over and over again because it is in fact nothing *but* this self-description. 'America' is thus continually invented or re-invented by way of both a *quoting* as well as a *troping* of its terms.

Interim / instead of … : the first map of america

Let me provide an example for this complexity of American origins and how they self-reflexively bend back upon themselves. 'America' is itself a cryptic figure: it is a country discovered instead of another continent: India; its people are given the name of another people; when America got its name in 1507 years ago, it was one who came after another, Amerigo Vespucci, and not the 'original' discoverer that gave America its name. And yet more significantly, this name was bestowed upon the new continent by the very literary institution of the old one: it was in the Lorraine Abbey of St. Dié-des-Vosges that cartographers under the direction of Martin Waldseemüller and in the on behalf of Duke René II copied and revised the maps compiled by Ptolemy. What is sometimes referred to as America's "birth certificate", then, the map that first named America, is itself a rewriting of an earlier text. Drawing upon Amerigo Vespucci's account of his expeditions to the "Mundus Novus" (and mistaking him to be the discoverer of the New Continent) they first labelled what they considered to be – unlike Columbus – a huge island and fourth continent as 'America'. 'America,' then, essentially is a misnomer.[13]

The name 'America,' then, inscribed on old maps and given the name of someone who came after another, the naming 'sent' from an old place, France, epitomizes both the notion of *belatedness* as well as that of an *originary revision* central to 'America'. 'America' is a palimpsest, a new name and shape drawn on an old map with the shape of the old cosmography still not entirely erased. The name 'America' is thus a text that was never originally written. Consequently, there is no originary text for 'America,' it is itself always a correction and amendment of earlier texts. The very naming of the New Continent as 'America' is itself the originary (and not original) scene of such a rewriting.[14] Furthermore: the cartographer, Waldseemüller, intended to give a male name to the continent since a female goddess had been the namesake of the old continent, but he conceded to

13 For a history of the Waldseemüller map, see John R. Hébert's "The Map that Named America: Martin Waldseemüller's 1507 World Map" (Hébert 2005).

14 This is also why I have preferred to talk of America's eccentricity rather than of its exceptionality. While the notion of an "American exceptionality" stresses America's place as different from that of old Europe, the West, etc., the notion of eccentricity addresses the way in which 'America' in Emerson's writing always necessarily stands beside itself.

a female ending. The result of which is a strange mixture of a male name with a female ending. The change of gender from Amerigo to America – the new Continent often being portrayed as a native woman submissively awaiting the European laying of the land – further suggests how the new Continent was considered to be something that was, essentially, other. Furthermore, because the mapmakers did not yet know the outlines of the new continent, they had to invent both the west as well as the pacific, the assumption being that if America is a continent it would also have to look like one and would have to be separate from a piece of land. Therefore, the scholars had to invent the Pacific Ocean before it was actually discovered.

Again, we see here at work again the peculiar kind of revision that, simultaneously, turns out to be an invention: While the naming of the new Continent followed certain old traditions (female ending for Continents, etc.), it nevertheless invents the meaning of 'America' as something qualitatively different from what has come before. The word 'America' is therefore not in fact a neologism, a new coinage, but rather a paleonym, a word that has been in use but is now recast in different terms.

It seems that Emerson was well aware of the kind of originary revision implied by the name 'America'. He complains that

> "broad America must wear the name of a thief [...] Amerigo Vespucci, the pickle-dealer at Seville, who went out, in 1499, a subaltern with Hojeda, and whose highest naval rank was boatswain's amte in an expedition that never sailed." (*W*, V, 152)

In comparison with the nations of Europe, he says, "[w]e are equally badly off in our founders, and the false pickle-dealer is an offset to the false bacon-seller" (*W*, V, 152) – alluding to the legend according to which England's national saint, George of England, by dubious means acquired the contract to supply the Roman army with bacon. America's "fall," as Emerson conceives of it in "Experience," is thus one caused by its failure to fully live up to its poetic or creative potential.

> "Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again. Did our birth fall in some fit of indigence and frugality in nature, that she was so sparing of her fire and so liberal of her earth that it appears to us that we lack the affirmative principle, and though we have health and reason, yet we have no superfluity of spirit for new creation?" (*W*, III, 45)

American poetry is thus necessarily still a specter, but when it reaches its full potential, it is precisely not the expression of some ground, of "nature" and "earth." Rather, it will be a spontaneous poetic impulse that compensates for the unfortunate "fit" of America's birth. Simultaneously, it will change the meaning of 'America' to signify something new. That America's is yet only "ghostlike," a specter not living up to the brilliant (democratic) promise connected to its name, is thus the condition of the possibility of a coming "superfluity of spirit," of the sustained relevance of a poetic impulse that for Emerson is also synonymous with

'America'. The passage quoted above also shows how carefully Emerson tries to avoid to make this a myth of auto-insemination – which would be, again, a myth of origins. Emerson here again allows for a minimal but necessary "incalculable" moment, a minimal influx of genius that is less a question of talent, knowledge, etc., but rather one of willingness, of being ready to engage with our surroundings. There is a place for the human in this poetics of America, even if this does not mean that one could simply use this poetics as an instrument. This is because America is invented by way of words, and not merely by way of words describing things. In other words: America itself is a poetic creation, an original quotation that, by realizing itself poetically changes and adds to what it was. The poetic nature of 'America' thus presents itself as a kind of double gesture, similar to the one that Joseph Riddel has described with reference to Poe's poetics: it is a "sending that crosses, a reflexive doubling that detours the letter from its destination" (Riddel 1995: 13).

The two essays that most fully embrace such a complex hermeneutics or poetological programme are "Circles" and the essay on "Quotation and Originality". In the latter, Emerson, who in his journals amasses the gains of forty years of excerpting the literary and philosophical writing of his time, argues that any writer must come to terms with what he considers to be an irredeemable debt to the past. Like those *Universalgelehrte*, like the "representative men" he portrays in the essay of the same title, the writer has inevitably "absorbed the learning of his times" (*W*, IV, 42) and must thus be aware of the weight that tradition places upon him. Necessarily, and even in a country of "Adamic" origins, then, any writer will have to write his own history by rewriting or refiguring what came before him.

Emerson insists that this phenomenon does not merely apply to intellectual history. He reminds us, in "Literary Ethics," that our individual histories may be incommensurable, even when it comes down to ordinary or civil history: "Is it otherwise with civil history? Is it not the lesson of our experience that every man, were life long enough, would write history for himself? What else do these volumes of extracts and manuscript commentaries, that every scholar writes, indicate? Greek history is one thing to me; another to you" (*W*, I, 170). Emerson thus suggests the radical and irreducible alterity of history, of nature, of individuality, etc. As a consequence, history is "forever renewed to be forever destroyed" (*W*, I, 359) as he argues in "The Transcendentalist". It is continually "written anew": "no history [...] is safe, but a new classifier shall give it new and more philosophical arrangement" (*W*, I, 170).

In Quotation and Originality, Emerson explains how this incessant process of "writing anew" comes as both a habit of appropriation as well as misappropriation:

> "The highest statement of new philosophy complacently caps itself with some prophetic maxim from the oldest learning. There is something mortifying in this perpetual circle. This extreme economy argues a very small capital of invention. The stream of affection flows broad and strong; the practical activity is a river of supply; but

> the dearth of design accuses the penury of intellect. How few thoughts! In a hundred years, millions of men, and not a hundred lines of poetry, not a theory of philosophy that offers a solution of the great problems, not an art of education that fulfils the conditions. In this delay and vacancy of thought we must make the best amends we can by seeking the wisdom of others to fill the time. If we confine ourselves to literature, 'tis easy to see that the debt is immense to past thought. None escapes it. The originals are not original. There is imitation, model, and suggestion, to the very archangels, if we knew their history. The first book tyrannizes over the second." (*W*, VIII, 179-180)

There is thus a conspicuous and irreducible "delay" or "vacancy" to our ordinary, commonplace knowledge about the world. And as soon as we inspect our origins more closely, they are complicated. The discovery of that "perpetual cycle" (of quotation and repetition) thus is tantamount to exposing the differences glossed over by what recommends itself as an origin. However, Emerson argues in *Nature* that the absence of origins is not entirely an American phenomenon:

> "The American who has been confined, in his own country, to the sight of buildings designed after foreign models, is surprised on entering York Minster or St. Peter's at Rome, by the feeling that these structures are imitations also, – faint copies of an original archetype." (*W*, I, 67-68)

For Emerson, however, this archetype in America is irretrievably lost. Therefore Emerson states in a passage that appears in "Representative Men" as well as in an epigraph to Quotation and Originality": "Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests and minds and stonequarries; and every man is a quotation from all his ancestors" (*W*, IV, 42; *W*, VIII, 176). Emerson also insists that "new art is always formed out of the old" (*CW*, II, 352). But because the old art itself was nothing but another *mise-en-abyme* of an earlier quotation, art's intertextuality is unavoidable, its pure origin always already adulterated.

Given this strong assertion of the inevitability of our always-already-quoting, then, it might be difficult to conceive of a place for originality, or potentiality, after all, "[t]here is imitation, model and suggestion, to the very archangels if we knew their history" (*W*, VIII, 180). There is, however, in Emerson something else that is implied by this irreducible historicity of writing (individuality, national discourse, etc.): Precisely because any text can only be a quotation, Emerson sees the possibility of something he calls the "alienated majesty" (*W*, II, 46) of quotation: misinterpretation, misappropriation, misreading. Emerson dictum that "[t]here is then creative reading as well as creative writing" (*W*, I, 93) implies that the act of our reading takes the text beyond being merely a compendium of quotations. To become creative writers or readers, however, we must be ready to commit to our "abandonment" (*W*, I, 217) to a force larger than ourselves and larger than our instrumentalising uses of language: "poetry," "genius," "power," "God," "love," etc. Like his successor Nietzsche, who saw in philosophy's inclination towards figurality the only exit from its historicist fixation, Emerson asks the writer or orator to give in to a kind of willed self-surrender that may have the power to loosen the laws of the old grammar in a joyful celebration of language. "In eloquence, the great

triumphs of the art are [...] when consciously [the orator] makes himself the mere tongue of the occasion and the hour, and says what cannot but be said. Hence the term abandonment, to describe the self-surrender of the orator" (*W*, VII, 49). This kind of willed abandonment to the *Eigensinn* of language – its figurality, its rhetoricity, its poeticity, its literaricity –, Emerson argues in "English Traits," is a cultural mark that is unique to America: "In the island [England] [...] there is [...] no abandonment or ecstasy of will or intellect" (*W*, V, 303). And, I would add, it is another indication that 'America,' as a cultural concept, in Emerson's writing is essentially a poetic idea, one that has to do with a certain exposure to the potential of language.

Against the necessary present "delay and vacancy of thought" (*W*, VIII, 180) necessitated by the groundlessness of our ways of meaning-making, then there is the promise of language's rhetoricity or language's innate potential for *poiesis* as something that makes possible other, supplementary meanings. But these meanings always come from the future because "[a]s yet, we have nothing but tendency and indication," as Emerson argues in "Literary Ethics" (*W*, I, 171). Literature thus is not an end in itself, it cannot offer finitude or transcendence, and it is also not something to be used as a means or an instrument. Rather, it is a sort of *crypt*, a place within a house yet beyond it. We can find a paraphrase of this process of the infinite referral, of this never arriving at meaning itself, in Emerson's metaphor of "the stars whose light has not yet reached us" (*W*, II, 147): meaning implies a future that is already past. Meaning comes to us from the future but once it has arrived, it is already past because it will then again be subject to yet another future meaning which cannot completely arrive at itself. For this reason, the production of new meanings does not function along the lines of prolepsis (by way of prophetic statements about the future), but rather metaleptically, that is, as a revisionary process in which the writer "transumes," to use Harold Bloom's term, the old figures in order to produce a new and supplementary meaning.[15]

Abandonment is just one among a number of terms that in Emerson denote the inevitable historicity of rhetorics and, vice versa, the inevitable rhetoricity of history. In his elaborations of "genius," "nature," and "reading" Emerson argues that philosophy and literature are mere postscripts if they do not engage in an exploration of and experimentation of the rhetoricity of language. These terms consequently all designate a revisionary process in which, even tough the meanings of the past cannot be escaped, the writer may still produce different

15 On the supplementary structure of writing, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1976: 281). On the legacy of the figure of "metalepsis" in American poetry (Whitman, Tate, Williams, Crane Frost), see John Hollander, *The Figure of the Echo* (1981: 117-132). On "transumption", see Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Bloom 2003). Bloom is especially strong on the mechanisms of metalepsis or transumption. He overrates, however, Emerson's "gnostic" rejection of history. As I have shown, the production of supplementary meaning in Emerson is precisely *not* tantamount to a rejection of history, rather, it necessitates first and foremost exactly a turning and recombination of the tropes of tradition.

meanings that will both be supplemental (going beyond the meaning supplied by the past) as well as spectral (echoing the past meanings). Much like Nietzsche, Emerson stresses that this process of giving over to the *Eigensinn* of language is, in the last instance, incalculable or, to use Nietzschean terminology, bordering on madness, that is, it cannot be instrumentalised as the ground for a national literature, poetry, etc. Other than those adhering to the doctrine of "representative words," Emerson imagines a vision of the promise of words that is at once radically reduced a well as substantially reconceptualised: words can no longer assert their representativity because they always already undergo a process of figuration, rhetoricity, etc. But it is exactly this experience of the malleability of words that for Emerson is 'representative' of America. Emerson's vision consequently shows that the quintessential American experience is not one of its soil but one of its language.

The unoccupied American Parnassus

It seems unlikely that Emerson's notion of an America 'reflexivized' and his interest in the perils of history and writing as expressing a theory of 'America' should have gone unnoticed. But Emerson's description of 'America' as a second-order structure of (hermeneutic) self-implication has not deserved any attention, not even in the last few decades of theoretically-minded research on Emerson's writing. Where, I thus want to ask, did Emerson discover his theme of criticism, of America's introversion or turning back upon itself? And: Is it not far-fetched to attest a complex theorization of the *vice versa* implication of history and writing to an author writing in the first half of the nineteenth century? If not, how did Emerson discover his hermeneutic theme? Having laid out the implications of Emerson's reconceptualization of America as a form of criticism, as critical sending that poetically detours its own letter from its destination, I want to briefly suggest in the following how Emerson came about his theme.

I have already shown before how Emerson describes America's epoch in "The American Scholar" as one of "introversion," and he uses Hamlet's predicament of being "'Sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'" to characterize America's early modernity. Returning to this description some forty years later, in his "Historic Notes of Life and Letters of New England" (*W*, X, 324-370), Emerson himself compiles a rough outline of how the concept of criticism was introduced to America. Emerson remarks that the age, "say in 1820 and the twenty years following" (*W*, X, 325), was "the age of severance, of dissociation, of freedom, of analysis, of detachment" (*W*, X, 326). He here also repeats his assessment of the time as an "age of arithmetic and of criticism" (*W*, X, 327) characterized by a strong "tendency to introversion" (*W*, X, 329). More importantly, however, "Life

and Letters of New England," provides important information about how a critical methodology till then foreign to America was introduced to New England's intellectual life, and how it allowed for a conceptualization of 'America's' criticism, inversion, or, simply, modernity.

Listing a number of formative influences – from the "backsliders from Calvinism," "Hartley and Priestley and Belsham, the followers of Locke," and "Swedenborg" to "the powerful influence of the genius and character of Dr. Channing" (*W*, X, 330) – Emerson here also suggests that it was Edward Everett's visit to Germany that changed the course of America's intellectual adolescence. As he boldly declares, it was "the genius of Everett which was almost comparable to that of Pericles in Athens" (*W*, X, 331). Emerson argues that Everett's import of German ideas came as a revolution to American philosophical thought that had previously ignored the revolutionary impact of German idealism:

> "Germany had created criticism in vain for us until 1820, when Edward Everett returned from his five years in Europe, and brought to Cambridge his rich results, which no one was so fitted by natural grace and the splendor of his rhetoric to introduce and recommend. He made us for the first time acquainted with Wolff's theory of the Homeric writings, with the criticism of Heyne. The novelty of the learning lost nothing in the skill and genius of his relation, and the rudest undergraduate found a new morning opened to him in the lecture-room of Harvard Hall." (*W*, X, 330)

The advent of modernity in Emerson's writing is consequently not only a result of my own application of a deconstructive language, rather, it comes as a consequence of Emerson's inheritance of certain problems in German philosophy and, more precisely, hermeneutics. In "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," Emerson himself suggests that the import of German ideas strongly helped to shape the contours of a "Higher Criticism" in New England.[16] The same essay also suggests that this theory of criticism is not merely an addition to his extensive reading on poetics and rhetorics in his years at Harvard – Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), Archibald Allison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790), or Thomas Campbell's "Lectures on Poetry" (1821) – but that his familiarity with hermeneutics, with the "exegetical discourses in the style of Voss and Wolff and Ruhnken" (*W*, X, 332) effectively prepares the ground for his own formulation of a complex theory of poetics. As Emerson points out, Everett's transfer of cutting edge German thought to America seemed to fall on an especially fruitful ground: "this learning instantly took the highest place to our imagination in our unoccupied American Parnassus" (*W*, X, 332).

Emerson, trained in Unitarian doctrines, would have been well aware of some of the hermeneutic problems associated with Unitarian theology. And biblical critics would obviously have been interested in the theory of interpretation that

16 On Emerson's implication in the "Higher Criticism" and its reception of a complex theory of hermeneutics in Germany, see Richard Grusin's *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics* (1991: 9–79).

early hermeneutics proposed. In her essay on "Emerson and the Higher Criticism," Barbara Packer provides a useful starting point: "Throughout the eighteenth century biblical critics showed an increasing willingness to turn on the biblical texts the same principles of critical analysis that had been employed in the study of classical authors" (Packer 1986). An attention to internal evidence, to secular history, to linguistics and editorial interventions would have profoundly changed the way in which biblical critics read the bible. Emerson would certainly have come across the revisionary scriptural analyses of Herder, Eichhorn, and Michaelis, but it was the aftermath of his older brother William's sojourn to Göttingen to study theology in 1824 that was decisive: Like Waldo, William was planning to become a minister but after studying the new theology in Germany, he found his faith troubled by the critical questions that he was taught to ask. When William returned from Germany – he had already decided not to pursue his career with the ministry – it was not long before brother Waldo was to end his clerical ambitions telling his congregation that he was no longer willing to administer the Holy Communion.

It has widely gone unnoticed how important this influx of German theory of interpretation or criticism was to become for Emerson and his followers at Harvard University. It happens in a moment when Unitarian dogma is quickly loosing its explanatory power and it occurs together with the late admission of British Romanticism in America. The figures involved in this exchange with German thought do not only include such known figures as Everett, Channing, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Emerson. It is in fact a whole generation of American intellectuals whose "transcendentalism" responds to a late reception of German philosophy and British Romanticism: George Ripley, Elizabeth Peabody, Theodor Parker, and Orestes Brownson are among those that combined a characteristically transcendentalist attitude with an interests in the Higher Criticism. Other theologicians and philosophers in fact decided to travel to Germany and to attend courses at German universities, among them Frederic Henry Hedge, George Ticknor, Andrews Norton, and Nathaniel L. Frothingham. The result of this complex trans-atlantic exchange in Emerson is a peculiar combination or, rather, amalgamation of the twin influences of British Romanticism and a German theory of hermeneutics. So far, only the former half of this equation has been properly investigated in American studies.[17]

I want to argue that there is a specific reason why the influence of a "Higher Criticism" was strong even outside of the theological faculty in Harvard. "Higher Criticism" combines the problematics of "spirit of the age" with the question of understanding itself. It comes as the discovery of the historic conditions for understanding or, to put it the other way round, the discovery of the hermeneutic

17 For a documentation of Emerson's exposure to German biblical criticism, see Julie Ellison, *Emerson's Romantic Style* (1994) and Barbara Packer, "Origin and Authority: Emerson and the Higher Criticism" (1986) and Wesley T. Mott, *'The Strains of Eloquence': Emerson and His Sermons* (1989: esp. 56–78).

problems inherent in every historicism. "Higher Criticism" thus amounts to a radical perspectivism that insists that history can only be viewed from the vanishing moment of the present, of contemporary experience, and thus its meaning cannot be fixed or guaranteed. For a nation, however, that needs to build upon its textual tradition, this necessitates critical methodologies with which to assert the present meaning of the texts of the tradition. But in order to do that, it would have to disassociate itself from its cultural present in order to establish a fixed point of view. As we have seen before, Emerson believes that this must come at the price of a symptomatic cultural stagnation: the fixation of America's founding history once and for all for him necessarily means the annulment of its cultural promise. The German theory of interpretation and hermeneutics would have been relevant in the American context because it allowed for a theorization of the complex processes of textual transmission. Just as the contemporary philosophy of Germany struggled with what they saw as the superiority of a "griechischer Geist" (see Szondi 1975: 139), so American writers had to explain why the "American Parnassus" was filled with European rather than American thought. Furthermore, the German theory of hermeneutics also offered an explanation of where America stood *apropos* the legacy of its own founding texts. German theory had discovered that writing is necessarily historic, that it always has a historical place and specificity, and that this insight applies both to the works that are being studied as well as to those studying them. The inheritance of British historicism, outlined in Chapter One, in Emerson thus comes together with the then already advanced theory of writing and reading in German philology. Emerson himself repeatedly pays tribute to this influence, for example when he speaks of the school of "biblical criticism," or when he mentions figures such as Eichhorn, Michaelis, Gieseler, the secular critics Niebuhr, Ruhnken, Ast and Wolff, as well as Schleiermacher, Schelling, and, obviously, Hegel.

For Emerson, it is precisely this German hermeneutics that lets him conceptualize America's characteristic turning-upon-itself. It allows for the discovery and theorization of a second order observer ('America,' the 'scholar'), constantly assessing the grounds on which he stands. As Michel Foucault has shown in *The Order of Things*, this discovery of a second order observer culminates, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, in a veritable crisis of representation. This is not merely interesting in terms of a history of philosophy, or as a step in the history of Western thought: Emerson conceives of 'America' as a structure that comes into being precisely as a second order observer. America needs to continually assess itself, needs to sort out its (textual) legacy and, thus, needs to account for the ways in which it 'means'. Its foundation as a nation is always already complicated by what Emerson terms "reflexivity," "inversion," or "criticism." While Emerson's writing repeatedly documents the influence of such a hermeneutics – see, for example the chapter "Books" in *Society and Solitude* (*W*,

VIII, 187-221) which reads like a compendium of contemporary philological science – it wants to go beyond its criticism of interpretation to conceive of a moment (in writing, in reading) that goes beyond interpretation, beyond what is more properly the *technique* of hermeneutics. Because the discipline of hermeneutics also allows for a conceptualization of the relation of history and writing, it helps Emerson to discover one of his main themes: the eccentricity of the contemporary moment and how it can be represented in writing. Surprisingly, and although Emerson's religious roots have been documented in great detail, the connection between his problematization of reading or history and his training in the hermeneutical techniques has not been made programmatically. If it has been made, it has always been restricted to Emerson's theological thought (see Grusin 1991). Also, it seems that Emerson's successors did not make this connection, otherwise it would have been more difficult to transform a writer, who had seen himself as a philosopher in the tradition of hermeneutic criticism, into the founding father of a specifically American pragmatism.

The critical movement of "inversion," "reflexivity," or "criticism" that hermeneutics effects – an investigation of the place of understanding, something that later came to be known as the *hermeneutic circle* – forms the basis of Emerson's philosophical undertaking because it lets him conceive America's place in history as eccentric. Here, America is no longer simply an exception, a nation that has completely severed its ties to the thought of the Old Continent. Rather, America figures as an excess beyond Europe and, more importantly, *beyond itself*. It comes into being as a sort of second order observer that constantly re-evaluates and re-founds its cultural foundations.

Maybe it is no wonder that this predicament of 'America' as an eccentric place has found its echo in European writing that, too, is eccentric with regards to its own tradition. Sigmund Freud's insinuation of an American "Kulturschaden" and his confession of not wishing to use "amerikanische Methoden" in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1969: IX, 244; Freud 1953: XXI, 145), Martin Heidegger's anxiety about a specifically American "Ruinanz" and "Weltverdüsterung" – that he thinks is responsible for the "technological catastrophe" that had befallen German thought (see Thomä 2000) –, Friedrich Nietzsche's denigration of America's "allgemeine Wohlfahrt" as "Brechmittel" (*KSA*, V, 165), or also Jacques Derrida's writing on Lacan writing on Poe: America is here figured as an echo, an uncanny place, that is not the end but a curious complication or excess of history.[18] When, for instance, Derrida discovers in his reading of "The Purloined Letter" that "a letter can always never arrive at its destination" (Derrida 1987: 148-152), then this becomes a more

18 For an interesting account of "America's" place in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger, see Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner's "Heideggers Amerika als Ursprungsort der Weltverdüsterung" (1997). For an overview of the concept of 'America' in European philosophy see Dieter Thomä, "Wie Europa versucht, Amerika auf den Begriff zu bringen. Über Condorcet, Tocqueville, Weber, Heidegger und andere" (2002) as well as Thomä's *Unter Amerikanern. Eine Lebensart wird besichtigt* (2000).

general philosophical conundrum in its own right. But it is also an echo of how, in 'America,' the foundation is always complicated by yet another detour, yet another turn. America's tradition is necessarily fragile, because it comprises concepts sent across time, but also – as I have argued with respect to the notion of "democracy" – beyond time. Emerson already sees this complication that pertains to the foundation of America and he believes that Americans must never stop re-discovering their country. For him, America's arrival is infinitely deferred and Americans need to continually "be born again into this new yet unapproachable America" (*W*, III, 72).

As a cultural entity that has no ground of its own but is brought into being as an effect of an enlightenment dream – Derrida provocatively calls it "the new Europe" (Derrida 1994: 40) –, America is, always already, itself a text, but a text without origin, a refiguration of an earlier (enlightenment) text, a "translation of a translation," as Riddel puts it: "America is not discovered, but invented, and by 'reading'; that is, by translation" (Riddel 1984: 904). As the excess not only beyond European history, but beyond itself, as a vague promise of a future yet to come, unachieved, "a point of arrival infinitely deferred by the act of searching for it" (Riddel 1984: 904). As we have seen before, as a cultural concept that somewhat misnomically was named after one who was sent to discover it but then nevertheless came second, it functions precisely as a *crypt*, as a *mise-en-abyme* of earlier designations (see Kronick 1984: 14).

Emerson's use of the concept of "criticism" is meant to suggest precisely the groundlessness of American ways of making meaning: As the self-reflexive procedure of turning something upon itself, criticism is itself not made up of its own discrete signs but of those it circulates, remobilizes, and refigures form earlier texts. But Emerson and his contemporaries knew well that the new scholarship was both a promise as well as a danger, as it included the danger of a profound skepticism that would expose everything that was once thought to be original as the translation of an unlocatable earlier text. And indeed, as Douglas Anderson has shown in his analysis of the textual complexity of America's founding texts (Anderson 2003), already early American literature is implied in this complex textual exchange. Even the diverse compacts written aboard the pilgrim ships are not simply original, spontaneous declarations of a new community, but meant to challenge the jurisdiction of the homeland now left behind for the new world. At the same time, such a self-implication engenders another risk: namely that once we arrive at an idea of 'America,' it will be so unique that it can hardly be 'representative'. Similarly, 'America' could stand for a production of an idea of 'self' that is so extreme in its isolation or so unique in its signature, that it will bear its country's name as 'representative' peculiarity. We are thus also confronted here with the paradox of a democratic self that needs to be unique and representative at the same time.

Emerson is fully aware that the discovery of such a structure of criticism for America means that it must reflexively appropriate the preconditions of its *Selbstverständnis*. In other words, it must present us with an interpretation that feeds back into the conditions that our historical situation places on our understanding. In this characteristically hermeneutic move or circle, however, Emerson conceives of the potential for literature or poetry to effect a rupture, to bracket all known designations. Literature, as the place of such a characteristic 'return within itself,' enables a defection of prior designations from themselves, it enables a mistranslation that, itself, is creative. As Emerson states in the essay "Art," "new art is always formed out of the old" (*W*, II, 351). But like a *mise-en-abyme* of earlier texts or quotations, it is not quite reducible to these: "The Genius of the Hour sets his ineffaceable seal on the work and gives it an inexpressible charm for the imagination" (*W*, II, 352). If such an "inexpressible charm," as Emerson argues, "overpowers the artist and finds expression in his work" (*W*, II, 352), then art establishes a minimal distance to both the past as well as its contemporary moment and, thus, may make a different future possible. Consequently, all art also needs to include a moment of "detachment," that he considers to be characteristic of "rhetoric": "The power to detach and to magnify by detaching is the essence of rhetoric in the hands of the orator or poet" (*W*, II, 354-5). If we "alight upon" a certain word, it can itself become "the deputy of the world" (*W*, II, 354). Art thus possesses an "aboriginal power" (*W*, II, 358) that is similar to "nature's eclecticism" (*W*, II, 352): it can convert and refigure our world, while not serving as yet another supposed origin. This is why Emerson speaks of art's "privilege" (*W*, II, 349) as that of a repetition that is fundamentally deflected from its origin: it must be formed out of the "symbols in use in [its] day and nation," but being exposed to processes of "rhetoric" and "power," "it never quite repeats itself" because not "imitation but creation is the aim" (*W*, II, 351).

American literature must therefore always introduce a minimal rupture within the texture of its tradition. And it is precisely by introducing this moment of detachment or rupture that America's literature becomes the place or medium of "criticism". As Emerson states in his *Journals*: "Literature is now critical" (*J*, V, 327). But because he knows that this "criticism" comes about by way of an exposure to a process of poiesis he also concludes: "Well, analysis may be poetic" (*J*, V, 327). Each function – that of criticism or analysis and that of creation or *poiesis* – in Emerson consequently always remains entangled with each other. Emerson does not propose an Adamic theory of art in which the American artist can simply build upon a kind of *tabula rasa*. Rather, he suggests that to clear the ground for something new in America always means that the artist exposes his creation to a moment of figuration. The resulting literature or art is obviously more a gesture than a literature, a canon, or a tradition. That is, it is a kind or mode of writing

rather than something that could be solidified into a literary thematics, canon, or tradition.

Emerson thus combines his interest in the German school of "criticism" – with its attention to a hermeneutic circle as constitutive of our ways of making meaning of the world – with an investigation of how poetry or literature can go beyond this circle to provide supplemental meanings. "Literature," of course is already a concept of the West, and one that includes precisely this "characteristic" return within itself. "Literature," as Hegel already pointed out, is synonymous with this kind of self-production as self-reflection.[19] America's poetic self-implication and the production of its literature are thus tantamount to a situation or crisis that we now generally term 'modernity'. And American literature understands itself as a modern literature or, at least, as a pretext to a thoroughly modern literature – because "[a]s yet, we have nothing but tendency and indication" (*W*, I, 171). America, in Emerson's vision, needs to understand itself as resulting from its own literary or poetic description, it needs to understand itself as a nation, consequently, that has *always already* been modern.

The "weighty sense" of the times and the invention of America

Because America comes about as a result of its literary invention, the American writer needs to continually search the present for constellations of meaning that have not yet been actualized. He must think of the present moment as a depository of meanings that, when they undergo a process of refiguration, may signify a qualitatively different future and so potentially enable the advent of the age of 'America'. As Emerson argues in his "Lecture on the Times":

> "The Times are the masquerades of the eternities; trivial to the dull, tokens of noble and majestic agents to the wise; the receptacle in which the Past leaves its history; the quarry out of which the genius of today is building up the Future. The Times – the nations, manners, institutions, opinions, votes, are to be studied as omens, as sacred leaves, whereon a weighty sense is inscribed [...] ." (*W*, I, 259)

Because the future sense of America is only inscribed but not present in the things at hand, the only exit from the circle of understanding, the circular structure of criticism is invention. The American writer must therefore do the impossible, he must remove all intentionality from understanding and abandon himself to the rhetoricity or figurality of things themselves, so that his writing opens up to potential meanings to come, to an understanding without ground. For Emerson and later American authors, the future invention of America is thus a matter of risking

19 For a lucid elaboration on the connection of literature and modernity in Hegel, see Maurice Blanchot's "Literature and the original experience" in his *The Space of Literature* (1982).

America's history, here and now, in favour of a projection of its history in the future.[20]

It is important to maintain here that this American obsession with the future is not merely proleptic or visionary – as Richard Poirier would have it in *A World Elsewhere* (Poirier 1985). American literature is not always the obsessive discourse about a utopian "world elsewhere," in the future, it is not simply the anticipated question about the nature of America in the future. Rather, as Charles Olson has phrased it when talking of Melville's writerly project, American writing is "projective", a "figure of forward" (Olson 1997: 92) that by re-writing or even mistranslating the past, breaks with the past and looks beyond the present to the future, but in a manner so that this future itself is fed back into the experience of a lived present. For American writers, the future thus holds a special place, but it holds this special place because they see a potentially different but yet unknown future, a "weighty sense" not yet actualized but "inscribed" in the "omens" and "sacred leaves" of the present. Herman Melville famously classifies America's orientation towards the future in the following passage from *White-Jacket*:

> "The Past is dead, and has no resurrection; but the Future is endowed with such a life, that it lives to us even in anticipation. The Past is, in many things, the foe of mankind; the Future is, in all things, our friend. In the Past is no hope; The Future is both hope and fruition. The Past is the text-book of tyrants; the Future is the Bible of the Free. […] We should, if possible, prove a teacher to posterity, instead of being the pupil of by-gone generations. More shall come after us than have gone before; the world is not yet middle-aged. […] And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. […] We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. […] At a period when other nations have but lisped, our deep voice is heard afar. Long enough, have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us, if we would but give utterance to his promptings." (Melville 1983: 505-6)

There is obviously a strong echo of a discourse of providence in this central passage from *White-Jacket*. But we should also be careful to notice a different tone that very often underwrites Melville's boisterous optimism: Melville's being "sent on through the wilderness of untried tings" does not only carry a quasi-religious significance, it always also comes as a risky linguistic challenge. Not only because the past is a "text-book" and the future a kind of "Bible" that yet needs to be written, but rather because this "peculiar, chosen people" need to speak a "peculiar" language, as Melville's novels show so programmatically. Already, Melville argues, America's voice can be heard loud and clear, but the coming of America's political Messiah is dependant upon yet another "utterance" whose terms have not yet been figured. Therefore, even the most optimistic American discourse

20 I am thinking here of William Carlos Williams' comments in *The American Grain* who imagines the American writer producing the history from which America springs from (see Williams 1971: esp. 221-223).

– in Melville or in Whitman, for example – needs to proceed by way of reading or misreading the tradition, by way of a quotation that transforms what it quotes. Emerson himself conceives of this kind of originary quotation as an atomizing of old discourses, as their recirculation in new fields of association. And it is only when such a quotation returns the terms of the tradition to us with an "alienated majesty" (*W*, II, 46), as Emerson argues in "Self-Reliance," that we may begin to grasp a qualitatively different future. American history thus comes as a build-up of figurations, as, more specifically, the patina of misinterpretations that steadily accumulates around the notion, or, rather, the metonymy that is 'America'.

For Emerson, this is clearly not meant to suggest that America lacks, more 'properly,' a reality. It is precisely because it comes about as a structure of criticism, as a refiguration or turn in language that it can effectively assert itself in language. And it is precisely because it is 'merely' an articulation in language that it can avoid the cultural and political stagnation that had become so prevalent in Europe. America's exposure to a certain potential in language is thus not so much a degeneration of a more proper, more solid reality – as Heidegger and other European commentators would later have it in their denunciation of America's (technological) ruinancy (*Ruinanz*) –, it is the realization of a freedom that is only possible in language and that comes as the assertion of a specific kind of freedom that can only be actualized, be "realized" if we are willing to risk what we are in favour of the "loud, ill-pitch'd," potentially meaningless articulation of what we may be in the future.

Consequently, and to return to the theme of hermeneutics in Emerson, we find a more complex hermeneutic circle at the heart of America's cultural constitution: America's reality (the reality of its democratic promise, the reality of the American epoch) depends on its articulation in a language that is yet to be found. But America's 'embarrassed' language experiments with the coming language of democracy itself is always fed back into what America is, *here and now*. That is: the advent or expectation of America's next age, of its future democratic significance is effective – culturally and politically – precisely in the present because it continually changes our account of what and who we are.

Emerson calls this complex figure of a reciprocity or *Wechselverhältnis* of the world and its articulation in writing simply "relation," and he insists that it can never be "betrayed" or dissolved. Rather, this "relation" is synonymous with what he calls "Fate":

> "Thus we trace Fate, in matter, mind, and morals, – in race, in retardations of strata, and in thought and character as well. It is everywhere bound or limitation. But Fate has its lord; limitation its limits; is different seen from above and from below; from within and from without. For, though Fate is immense, so is power, which is the other fact in the dual world, immense. If Fate follows and limits power, power attends and antagonizes Fate. We must respect Fate as natural history, but there is more than natural history. For who and what is this criticism that pries into the matter? Man is not order of nature, sack and sack, belly and members, link in a chain, nor any ignominious baggage, but a stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the

> Universe. He betrays his relation to what is below him, – thick- skulled, small-brained, fishy, quadrumanous, – quadruped ill-disguised, hardly escaped into biped, and has paid for the new powers by loss of some of the old ones. But the lightning which explodes and fashions planets, maker of planet and suns, is in him. On one side, elemental order, sandstone and granite, rock-ledges, peat-bog, forest, sea and shore; and, on the other part, thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature, - here they are, side by side, god and devil, mind and matter, king and conspirator, belt and spasm, riding peacefully together in the eye and brain of every man." (*W*, VI, 21-22)

Emerson argues that "Fate" does not only show in the ordinary but unpredictable facts of our lives, as a more commonsensical definition would have it. Rather, "Fate" becomes equally factitious in language, or in what Emerson calls "thought" or "character." Consequently, the eventfulness of nature is paralleled by the eventfulness of the human mind as a "stupendous antagonism." It is itself a power that can bring the incommensurable together and form a new world or, even, "compose nature" itself. Therefore, as Emerson declares emphatically, the unrestrainable power that "fashions planets" is in man himself, by virtue of his "thought," "character," and "criticism." Emerson thinks that something of this peculiar American openness to a potential in language can characteristically be found in the solitary voices of the few American thinkers that America's short history has produced. And it is precisely because their "speech" abandons itself to a potential in language that it may effectively "reorganize" and "renew" our reality, as he argues in "The Transcendentalist":

> "Soon these improvements and mechanical inventions will be superseded; these modes of living lost out of memory; these cities rotted, ruined by war, by new inventions, by new seats of trade, or the geologic changes: – all gone, like the shells which sprinkle the sea-beach with a white colony to-day, forever renewed to be forever destroyed. But the thoughts which these few hermits strove to proclaim by silence as well as by speech, not only by what they did, but by what they forbore to do, shall abide in beauty and strength, to reorganize themselves in nature, to invest themselves anew in other, perhaps higher endowed and happier mixed clay than ours." (*W*, I, 359)

Being the result of its own rearticulation, America cannot escape the linguistic system by which it is produced. Rather: this is the condition *sine qua non* of America as the place of a democratic politics. We will return to this idea in Chapter Five.

This structure of a hermeneutics or criticism, I want to argue, is also discernible in Emerson's writing: it cannot achieve transcendence, it can never entirely free itself from the past or from its present situation. To achieve transcendence would mean that it circumscribed, in its entirety, a philosophical system, with no allowance for the effects of figuration or troping anymore. But its openness to the 'esoteric' effects of signification and troping, its lack of a more 'properly' philosophical systematicity leaves it an allegory of philosophy that exposes figuration or tropes as the material, 'real' condition of any philosophy and writing. These effects are, as De Man has shown with regards to the philosophical writing of Kant and Hegel, themselves the condition of the possibility of the conceptual

system that is philosophy (De Man 1996: 89). And just as a text can never escape the linguistic system by which it is produced, so a reading of a text can never itself completely account for this text since it is itself a real event that is inevitably caught up in the event it reads.

Emerson, himself speaking from an eccentric cultural perspective, may be one of the first to realize the untapped potential of these effects both poetically *as well as* politically. He conceives of America itself as a form of a poetic *Vollzug*, as the event of a structure in language that acquires and produces its very own facticity. When Emerson writes about America and when America, eventually, expresses itself poetically, then it will already be writing *after the fact*, that is, writing will always already have established the America that it describes. But as the result of a poetic *Vollzug*, as the turning of the tropes that signify 'America,' America will never entirely coincide with its description. In the structure of reciprocity or "relation" that I have outlined above, the figurative excess of writing spills over into the ordinary lives of Americans just as the unthinkable variety of American moods and manners continually asks for yet another poetic description. It is this peculiar, chiastic commingling of text and world, of poetry *and* America that, as Emerson will later argue, make America a "poem in our eyes" (*W*, III, 38). But this poem, because it is "yet unsung" (*W*, III, 38) is never an end in itself. "Dazzl[ing] the imagination" (*W*, III, 38), it must itself become the source of yet another refiguration.

It is important to maintain here that Emerson thinks that this process of poetic *Vollzug* cannot be instrumentalised politically. Just as the power of "Fate," it overrides what Emerson calls the "kingdom of cause and effect" (*W*, III, 67). It includes a moment of a radical suspension of prior designations in which the refiguration changes what it describes. The multiplicity of life in the present moment of culture – what Emerson calls the "irreducibleness of the elements of human life to calculation" (*W*, III, 70) – functions as an antagonism that needs to be continually translated into poetry, writing, or literature. But it is precisely with this translation that we may effect a real change, an incalculable refiguration of what and who we are. The structure of the hermeneutic circle, of America's self-implication as a poetic concepts is thus tantamount to the possibility of America as the place of *another* politics to come. This democratic politics would require a political horizon that recedes in the instant that a political programme is articulated. And America's promise – as a cultural concept, as a nation – is to be found precisely in the gap between two figurations, in the "verge of to-day" that comes as a moment of *Kehre*, transition, or poetic refiguration in which previous political or cultural designations lose their significance and new ones are invented.

But this also means that the position from which we understand is, at the same time, the object of our understanding. America is a description of a political state that is the result of that very description. An analysis of how America is understood

consequently discloses or, at least in a certain sense, produces the hermeneutic situation that is America. In other words: An analysis of America's interpretation of the world discloses the hermeneutical situation from which 'America' occurs. And because Emerson finds himself in this curious hermeneutic circle, he does not merely want to describe America's epoch, but rather America's *epoché*, that is, how America is constantly implied in a transition or *Zeitenwende* that continually refigures what America is – as a concept and as a nation.

We have to be careful not to dismiss this procedure in Emerson as one of his many mysticisms. This procedure, because it exposes the potentially irreducible contingency and singularity of America's situation in the present, also exposes its radical historicity. Emerson's focus on the event of America's present is therefore not a mystical move intended to get rid of the vicissitudes of history or to transcend history in the suggestion of an America that is beyond history. Rather, his procedure leads us back to history exactly by exposing a moment of transition in which history is no longer self-evident and, thus, the possibility of another 'history' is signalled. When Emerson talks of the "power" inherent in the moment of "to-day," he means to alert us to a kind of *Nullpunkt*, a point zero, that itself opens up incalculable (historical) possibilities. But as Hans Blumenberg points out, the function of this point zero can only "be ascertained as something either not yet arrived at or already crossed" (Blumenberg 1983: 469). As Blumenberg argues, this transition must necessarily happen in a minimal or vanishing moment, but it nevertheless guarantees the refiguration or "reversal" that brings about the next epoch:

> "As regards its linguistic derivation, 'epoch' is better suited to designate a punctiform event whose importance is being stressed than the period of time that is, say, introduced by this event and is to be characterized in terms of it. The Greek word 'epoché' signifies a pause [*Innehalten*] of a movement, and then also the point at which a halt is made [*angehalten wird*] or a reversal of direction takes place." (Blumenberg 1983: 459)

Emerson's focus on the moments of America's transition consequently comes as both a move towards the present and as a break with actuality in a bracketing of the hold of everything that is ordinary, common, etc. In his attempts at finding a poetic expression adequate to the potential of such an "interval" (*W*, XII, 44), "gulf" (*W*, II, 69), or "verge" (*W*, II, 315) that is both "no longer" and "not yet", Emerson's writing enters, as Stephen Erickson has expressed it, a "region of maximal vulnerability" (1999, 103): It must risk destroying everything that is known in order to prepare for what is yet to come. Emerson here strongly echoes Coleridge's dictum about a "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (Coleridge 1983: II, 6). Coleridge, who had strongly influenced Emerson especially in his pre-*Nature* years, argued that it is only such a momentary, poetic suspension of prior designations that is able

> "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand." (Coleridge, Engell, and Bate 1983: II, 6)

Similarly, Emerson suggests that it is a writing that is open to language's poeticity or rhetoricity that can effect the radical suspension of significance "for the moment", as Coleridge calls it. This suspension of common diction or, as Emerson prefers to call it, this "abandonment" to the poetic potential in language, prepares the ground for a refiguration even of what we think is most ordinary, customary, or common.

Emerson therefore combines the conundrum of America's hermeneutic circle – in which only the (historical) specification of America's age can guarantee the existence of the concept 'America' – with an attention to those transitional moments that are not themselves reducible to the process of history but that themselves make historical change possible. Such moments of a deflection from the safe course of history result out of an "influx" (*W*, I, 329) of "power," of "nature," of "experience," or, simply, of "life". Such moments, Emerson argues, are the forces by which the ordinary becomes estranged while we begin to see the incalculable emergence or "becoming" (*W*, VII, 38) of something new, something that our history cannot yet account for. If America is going to prove to be the culmination of nations, then it will be precisely because it does not cease to be ready to give in to such a process of estrangement or deviation from itself. As he argues in "Self-Reliance":

> "This which I think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life and what is called death. Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates; that the soul *becomes* [...] . " (*W*, II, 69)

America's characteristic *inquiétude* – how it always "darts to an aim" – thus necessarily comes part and parcel with its promise: precisely because it is a cultural construct that is oriented not towards its current ontology but towards what it ought to be in the future, it at all times needs to be ready to receive an influx of power that will challenge what this culture is, ordinarily, but that will make its future state possible. Emerson, as a cultural analyst, is less interested in attempting to specify America's age than he is in accounting for that "moment of transition from a past to a new state" that secures the potential advent of a future 'America'. His careful descriptions of the America of "to-day" are consequently not historical descriptions aimed at categorizing and cataloguing American life in the present moment. Rather, they are intended to provide a strong sense of the irreducible multiplicity of American life in the contemporary moment. And it is precisely in this multiplicity that Emerson locates a potential for an America that does not yet

exist, that is yet unarticulated. Hence, in "The American Scholar" he urges the writer to concentrate on the heterogeneity of his own contemporary moment and calls on him to "work[] up all that is wasted to-day into to-morrow's creation" (*W*, I, 373).

It is because of this attention for a disruption of historical continuity in a vanishing moment that itself makes all historical change possible that I am not entirely convinced of the project of a "de-transcendentalization of the Emerson image" first proposed by Lawrence Buell (Buell 1984: 123) and then elaborated by Michael Lopez (Lopez 1988; 1994: 165-189) and others. I think, rather, that (new) historicist readings stress the meaningful evolution of Emerson's thought in his time at the cost of an attempt to conceptualize the radical timeliness of Emerson's thought in the sense that it has to be discovered anew as a reading over and over again. Instead of a thoroughly "de-transcendentalized" Emerson, I would like to propose an Emerson that is immersed in the present state of his culture while simultaneously exploring the field of contemporary culture for a potential that is yet unactualized, "unachieved". Emerson's present, then, would be one that is not self-present with itself, it is a present that Emerson cannot in the last instance specify because its description would require a point of view that is itself exempted from the process of history. But Emerson repeatedly alerts us to the fact that writing, in the present, is itself radically contingent and can itself only make sense of the present for a limited period of time. Thus, Emerson's anecdotal (and unattributed) concession of "I do not believe this anymore," or his comment in a letter to Henry Ware Jr. that "[I] could not but feel pain in saying some things in that place and presence" (Ware 1846: 395-396). Emerson here stresses the radical (historical) contingency of all speech acts, suggesting that what he expresses as a speaker is both unrepeatable and irreversible. "These things look thus to me! To you, otherwise" (Ware 1846: 396), he insists in the same letter, anticipating not only how he will contradict his contemporaries and potentially also himself, but how his writing will have to be read and misread by future generations of readers.

„Faith and love are apt to be spasmodic in the best minds. Men live on the brink of mysteries and harmonies into which they never enter, and with their hand on the door-latch they die outside" (*CEC*, 120). What Emerson describes as the hermeneutic circle of man and history, is thus also apt to describe the interminability (*Unabschliessbarkeit)* of writing and reading in the present moment.[21] As Buell points out, Emerson's writing is therefore

> „very likely to provoke present-minded responses that seem powerful at the time but give way to others as the intellectual climate changes. Emerson vis-à-vis Kierkegaard yields to Emerson vis-à-vis social radicalism which yields to Emerson vis-à-vis Nietzsche and Derrida and so on through the succession of dominant isms." (Buell, „Emerson Industry," 135)

21 *Unabschliessbarkeit* is Gadamer's term, see Gadamer et al. 2001: 53.

The next chapter will attempt to make obvious just how much this is true not only of our critical responses to Emerson, but even more so of the way in which he himself re-reads and re-writes his own work.

Four

Towards a "Radical Correspondence"

"The world is enigmatical, – everything said, and everything known or done, – and must not be taken literally, but genially. We must be at the top of our condition to understand anything rightly. You must hear the bird's song without attempting to render it into nouns and verbs" (W, VII, 180), Emerson argues in *Society and Solitude*. To take something "genially," to use Emerson's term, means to resist the desire to "interrogate," to "anatomize" (*W*, VII, 180) and to engage in a process that, rhetorically or poetically, gives form to the eventfulness of the present. Similar to the "hermeneutics of facticity" that a rhetorically-minded Martin Heidegger develops in his early work (see *GA* 63) – a hermeneutics that, by engaging in a process of understanding, would always also produce its own, precarious ground –, Emerson's 'theory' of writing and poetics is interested not so much in results (the 'work,' the 'poem,' etc.), but rather in the actuality of rhetorical or poetical processes of figuration, that is, in how figuration is both an expression of *literature's implication in the world* as well as in *how figuration guarantees the contemporariness of writing*.

For Emerson, it is precisely not the poet's will to perfection, his attempt to create a work that will last, that guarantees the 'geniality' of his writing. In "works of genius," Emerson argues, "[t]here is no painful effort, but it is the spontaneous flowing of the thought. Shakspeare made his Hamlet as a bird weaves its nest. Poems have been written between sleeping and waking, irresponsibly" (*W*, VII, 182). Emerson continues to say that "[f]ancy defines herself" (*W*, VII, 182), drawing attention to the inevitable or necessary (hermeneutic) circle that all writing is liable to. While this means that reading, interpretation, history, and, especially, writing, cannot escape their temporal particularity, the facticity of their historical situation, this correspondence and contemporaneity of literature conversely allows for poetry or writing to actually form its historical moment. This is then precisely the conundrum of the American writer's hermeneutic self: he needs to enact in writing the very 'scene' out of which his performance results. Every writing, if it wants to be 'American,' necessarily includes such a self-reflexive circle, it is never merely the representation of an external reality but, rather, contributes to the construction of that reality by its own acts of figuration and refiguration. In terms of what I have been arguing about the *con-temporaneity* of Emerson's writing, this means that American writing rhetorically enacts the very present it purports to describe. Emerson's rhetoric of correspondence, by drawing attention to this aspect of a more generally defined *poiesis*, makes it possible for writing to come close to the fleetingness of the present moment and at the same time models and gives form to the present's eventfulness in a process of figuration.

As a consequence, this "circle" of history and our writing can never merely be a question of representation or *Darstellung*. It is, in Emerson's term, a "riddle" that cannot be solved and that cannot be made transparent. This is why Emerson prefers to call the correspondence between human thought or writing and the world a "radical correspondence" (*W*, I, 29): the event of history spills over into writing and writing, *vice versa,* by virtue of its eventfulness or poeticity, itself forms and brings about events in history. Emerson's theory of the power of language and rhetoric consequently can therefore also be read as an early criticism of a kind of naïve representationalism and a historicism that thinks of the world as something that can be represented, more or less adequately, in the text of the author or historian. Rather, he conceives of the world itself as a text, a text that by way of a constant recourse to itself continually rewrites itself.

Emerson repeatedly uses the figure of the Sphinx to talk about this quandary of the necessary self-reflexiveness and mutual implication of writing and history: "There sits the Sphinx at the road-side, and from age to age, as each prophet comes by, he tries his fortune at reading her riddle" (*W*, I, 34). The Sphinx, that strange creature, sits at the roadside and oversees our coming and going. Emerson understands that the riddle that the Sphinx presents us with also concerns the risk that is involved in the epochal threshold, in the transition from one age to the next. The Sphinx presents every new age with a new riddle, with something that is completely unprecedented. And as a cultural artefact whose accompanying language has been lost, it alerts us to the fact that we may not be able, in the last instance, to specify our own situation in history. Emerson revises the myth of the Sphinx, that "standing problem which has exercised the wonder and the study of every fine genius since the world began" (*W*, I, 34), as a problem of poetics: it is a reading that is at stake here, a reading both of history or tradition as well as of our progress "on the way," as Stanley Cavell has phrased it (Cavell 1992: 137). The solution of the riddle of the Sphinx would then be a text, or rather, an interpretation of the tradition that would reflect our own age, our progress on the road of history. But this would mean, in Emerson terms, that we read history "genially" so that by reading the text of history we create another text that in turn constitutes the ways in which we perceive our world. The deciphering of a world consequently is not merely the discovery of a writing that is hidden among the text of history, rather, our reading of the text of history provides an insight into the hermeneutic fix in which we inevitably create a new history when we start to read it.

How crucial this riddle of the Sphinx is to both Emerson's poetological as well as historical thought becomes obvious if we look at some of the various references to it in his writing. For example, in a passage in Emerson's journal when he attempts to define what happens when "nations culminate" (*J*, VIII, 345). This

culmination, Emerson argues, would mean nothing less than the solution of the riddle of the sphinx in poetry:

> "*Sphinx*. 'T is said that the age ends with the poet or successful man who knots up into himself the genius or idea of his nation; and that when the Jews have at last flowered perfectly into Jesus, there is the end of the nation. When Greece is complete in Plato, Phidias, Pericles, the race is spent and rapidly takes itself away. When Rome has arrived at Caesar and Cicero, it has no more that it can do, and retreats. When Italy has got out Dante, all the rest will be rubbish. So that we ought rather to be thankful that our hero or poet does not hasten to be born in America, but still allows us others to live a little and warm ourselves at the fire of the sun, for, when he comes, we others must pack our petty trunks and be gone." (*J*, VIII, 345)

In 1873, travelling to Egypt with his family while their house was being repaired after it had been badly damaged by a fire, Emerson records in his journal:

> "All this journey is a perpetual humiliation, satirizing and whipping our ignorance. The people despise us because we are helpless babies who cannot speak or understand a word they say; the sphinxes scorn dunces; the obelisks, the temple walls, defy us with their histories which we cannot spell." (*J*, X, 407-408)[1]

In these passages on the problem of the Sphinx, a blueprint for Emerson's poetological programme can be discerned: if we solve her riddle poetically, then we establish an exchange between the world (as it is mediated or changed through language) and language (as it is mediated or inflected by the world). But the image of the Sphinx also suggests that this exchange is, essentially, both interminable and incalculable. It is a riddle whose solution is both necessary as well as impossible. This chapter will attempt to reconstruct this poetological programme of a more "radical correspondence" by outlining Emerson's rhetorical 'programme' in *Nature* and other essays – 'programme' here in inverted commas because, as we have seen before, Emerson's programmaticity consists very often in precisely refuting any aspirations to programmatic or argumentative consistency.

The "endless catalogue" of nature

Two rhetorical questions at the beginning of the introduction to *Nature* bring us back to the problem of America's *Zeitenwende*: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?" (*W*, I, 3), Emerson asks and thus alludes to a more general problem of poetic expression. He implies that an originary relation to the world is impossible precisely because, in poetry, the correspondence of text and world

1 There are a couple of other corroborative passages in the *Journals*, for example when he argues that "There sits the Sphinx from age to age, in the road, Charles says, and every wise man that comes by has a crack with her" (*J*, III, 525). Or earlier, quoting from De Stael: "The aenigma of ourselves swallows up, like the Sphinx, thousands of systems which pretend to the glory of having guessed its meaning" (*J*, II, 121).

comes as a "relation." Poetry cannot effect the "original" or transparent communication between worlds and things, as close as it may get to such an ideal communication. Therefore, we can never quite recuperate an 'Adamic' situation in which the world and the text fall together to form a single ontological reality. In Emerson's concept of poetics, there is thus necessarily an aspect of *relation* that alerts us to the fact that our poetry can only be made to resonate with the world it describes. Emerson's "original relation" is thus not what he elsewhere calls a "First philosophy" (*W*, V, 244). It is not some kind of originary representation, but an act that is always already turned upon itself, a transformational moment and a moment of crossing. The poetic power of tropes, Emerson argues, lies precisely in how they always turn on something or turn from themselves. As he argues in "Art": "The power to detach and to magnify by detaching is the essence of rhetoric in the hands of the orator or poet" (*W*, II, 354-355). That is, poetry's "essence" is one of detachment or magnification, it cannot help but refigure the thing it represents in the act of representation.

Emerson's call for an "original relation" should thus not simply be read as another take on an "Adamic" theory of language in America.[2] While Adamic language theory proposes the rediscovery or re-founding of an original unison between world and language, Emerson in *Nature* significantly revises this argument to suggest that any poetic use of language puts us into a "relation" with the world. This relation may be "original," but it becomes so not because it uncovers a more direct intercourse of words and things but rather because it may figure something that is radically "detached" from all our previous significations of the world. Furthermore, Emerson sees a danger specific to an Adamic theory of language: because it posits an original, direct or transparent intercourse between things and their representation in language, it may fasten words too much to things and thereby lead to an ossification of language that would make it unresponsive to the change of our circumstances. Governed by such an authoritarian rule of correspondence, language would become, as Emerson expresses it with a phrase he takes from Goethe's *Faust*, a "paper currency" (*W*, I, 30), a structure that only supports itself but is no longer open to the effects of troping.

"Nature," in Emerson's long essay of the same name, is reevaluated as an entity that precisely serves as a repository of such tropings or supplemental meanings. It is an unbound and eventful principle of flux, that can counter language's tendency towards the ossification or sedimentation of its forms. Nature, then, in Emerson does not simply stand for the realm of the natural, it needs to be understood as that field out of which we produce change, that, as a field that has not yet been made to conform to the narrow paths of our ordinary lifes, challenges us to discover our "entitle[ment] to the world":

2 On Emerson's complex reinterpretation of an Adamic theory of language, see also James Perrin Warren, *Culture of Eloquence: Oratory and Reform in Antebellum America* (Warren 1999: esp. 29-51).

> "Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will. He may divest himself of it; he may creep into a corner, and abdicate his kingdom, as most men do, but he is entitled to the world by his constitution. In proportion to the energy of his thought and will, he takes up the world into himself." (*W*, I, 20)

There is, then, a fundamental indivisibility and mutual responsivity between nature and man. This obviously goes beyond conventional descriptions of nature and the natural because it suggests that nature itself is not merely a materiality, but itself already possesses significance. In a later essay that revisits some of the statements made in *Nature*, Emerson will therefore argue that "[n]ature represents the best meaning of the wisest man" (*W*, I, 214). Because of this mutual interaction, our entitlement to the world, our dependence on it cannot be dissolved. Later in Emerson's work, this entitlement is more often than not characterized as a risk, as the possibility of skepticism and the implied possibility of the loss of the world, as Stanley Cavell has shown in his careful elaboration of Emerson's writing. As Cavell argues, both the "repudiation of the world" and a "revelation of the world" (Cavell 1984: 34) lie closely together in Emerson. The multiplicity of nature consequently is not only a promise, it can also turn into the "abyss of skepticism" (*W*, II, 305) in which what we ordinarily experience as our world is lost and where we are offered the intimation of a wholly different world. As Cavell points out in *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Cavell 1988: 27-49), Emerson here implicitly refers to his allies in European Romanticism, where the extension of experience that nature authorizes is always also accompanied by the risk of skepticism. Cavell argues in an imaginative discussion of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" that the promise of transcendence in or through nature in Romanticism is always already exposed to the risk of encountering the "frozen" world through which the mariner travels and which Cavell aligns with the position of skepticism (Cavell 1988:48). Emerson seems to be aware, that even when we most radically distance ourselves from the world – when we repudiate the world, "creep into a corner" and "abdicate our kingdom" (*W*, I, 20) –, and even if we reach out to embrace the world, there is yet always a reminder of the potential slipperiness of the world that Emerson describes so memorably in "Experience": "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition" (*W*, III, 49).

But even if this conundrum of our "unhandsome" *Wechselverhältnis* with the world cannot be dissolved in language, it can, to use Cavell's term, be "acknowledged" in a discourse, that is no longer philosophy, but rather, poetry or literature. Even if Emerson's essays – and, especially, *Nature* – sometimes follow typological templates, they will more often aim at what he calls "indirection," that is, at a kind of writing that is open to the effects of troping. Ideally, as Emerson argues in *Society and Solitude*, this "abandonment" (*W*, VII, 181) to language's ungovernable rhetoricity then itself forms our inevitable responsivity to an incalculable nature:

> "Everything in the universe goes by indirection. There are no straight lines. I remember well the foreign scholar who made a week of my youth happy by his visit. 'The savages in the islands,' he said, 'delight to play with the surf, coming in on the top of the rollers, then swimming out again, and repeat the delicious manoeuvre for hours.' Well, human life is made up of such transits. There can be no greatness without abandonment." (*W*, VII, 181)

This kind of spontaneity and indirection is the specific sign of genius in Emerson. In other words: if the writer is willing to give in to and abandon himself to the effects of figuration and troping, then his art or literature will precisely give form to the mutual implication of man and world: "Thus in art, does nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works" (*W*, I, 24). Nature, consequently, is the name for a troping. And writing, for Emerson, is a *mise-en-scène* of this troping. However, it is important to note here, that Emerson conceives of nature's "working through the will of man" not as a process that can be instrumentally or intentionally controlled: Both the world ("nature") and man's take on it in "art" are dependant upon each other, this is why Emerson, in "Art," argues that man is "but nature's finer success in self-explication" and that he speaks of "nature's eclecticism" (*W*, II, 352). The process of nature, consequently, is contained within that of man and *vice versa*, and their exchange is irreducible. This is why Emerson rates "living man" among the finer pieces of art, as he explains in "Art":

> "There is no statue like this living man, with his infinite advantage over all ideal sculpture, of perpetual variety. What a gallery of art have I here! No mannerist made these varied groups and diverse original single figures. Here is the artist himself improvising, grim and glad, at his block. Now one thought strikes him, now another, and with each moment he alters the whole air, attitude and expression of his clay. Away with your nonsense of oil and easels, of marble and chisels; except to open your eyes to the masteries of eternal art, they are hypocritical rubbish." (*W*, II, 357-358)

Contrary to the eternalizing, unificatory tendency of mannerisms, Emerson's notion of "art" debunks any kind of "hypocritical rubbish" in favour of an "aboriginal power" (*W*, II, 358) that fragments and separates rather than assembles. Art is not the medium in which the consonance of world and man is asserted, rather, it gives form to the fleetingness or contingency of our interaction with the world. As a consequence, as Emerson argues elsewhere, "[t]he intellectual and the active powers [...] succeed each other, and the exclusive activity of the one, generates the exclusive activity of the other" (*W*, I, 22). This complicity of the intellect and the material world is true even if "there is something unfriendly in each to the other" (*W*, I, 22). In fact, it is central to Emerson's notion of art: as a fundamental antagonism, it is responsible for the production of new meaning. If it were to stabilize, the creation of new meaning, and thus, the production of art, literature, etc., would cease. Because Emerson qualifies this relation as an antagonism, he also removes the "aboriginal power" of art and literature from an ideology of individual will or intentionality: "[B]eauty [...] comes unsought, and comes because

it is unsought," and therefore "[t]he beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation" (*W*, I, 23). Because of this mutual exchange, I take Emerson to say, nature is always a power, and power, on the other hand, is nature.

Emerson thus defines the work of art in *Nature* as an "abstract," an "epitome," or a "miniature" (*W*, I, 23) of nature. But he insists that it is not the beauty of the work of art that expresses nature but rather, that it is the beauty of nature that expresses itself in the work of art. Emerson thus significantly inverts the traditional relation of art and nature to suggest that "the standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms" (*W*, I, 23). Here, it is no longer the work of art that gives form, rather, nature itself "is a sea of forms" (*W*, I, 23). Therefore, individual creative acts function only as an "alembic" (*W*, I, 24) through which nature passes: "Thus in art, does nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works" (*W*, I, 24). These "first works," consequently, are to be found in the "endless catalogue" (*W*, I, 14) of nature, in its "totality" (*W*, I, 24). In a lecture in 1843, Emerson gives an even more radical account of this irreducibility of the relation between art and the writer, between the world and nature:

> "The sense of nature is inexhaustible. You think you know the meaning of these tropes of nature, and today you come into a new thought, and so all nature converts itself instantly into a symbol of that; and you see it has been chanting that song like a cricket ever since the creation. Nature is a tablet on which any sense may be inscribed, only not anything cunning and consciously vicious. Draw the moral of the river, the rock, and the ocean. The river, the rock, and the ocean say, 'Guess again.'" (*LL*, I, 69)

Nature, then, is not simply the unmovable, stable ground upon which we build our artistic creations. It is itself a store of tropes. It is itself a symbol and any account of nature in artistic creation will be provisional, since there is no closure to nature. It is, to use Emerson's word, "inexhaustible" and our artistic correspondence with it is thus potentially interminable. Consequently, this coming forth, this passing through, of something from nature to art is what Emerson terms "beauty," and for him, it is the "ultimate end" (*W*, I, 24) of the universe: "Beauty, in its largest sense and profoundest sense, is one expression of the universe" (*W*, I, 24). For Emerson, beauty, in "its largest and profoundest sense," means that the forms of nature always already overtake the formations and figurations devised by intellect, intention and will. Therefore, the work of art, in its characteristic going beyond of authorial intention and formation, corresponds to the world in its infinitude. This also implies a radical de-individualisation of the work of art that is now no longer dependant upon the individual whose "operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result" (*W*, I, 5).

If Emerson, in Chapter II of *Nature*, sets out to define the "uses" of nature according to the conventions of typology, then it is precisely his genius to deny

any kind of naturalistic utilitarianism by precisely refuting the notion of nature's usefulness. If the Chapter on "Beauty" starts out with the standard typological argument that nature is a reservoir of beauty only to be transcended, brought to visibility by the author, then it closes on a surprising note to argue that nature is its own use, so to speak, that it is an end in itself, and, therefore, a realm radically removed from human intervention. Nature is its own "final cause" and thus we arrive here again at the same deconstruction of origins that we have met before, because nature is conceived as an original displacement, as the realm of original differance. Beauty too, consequently, is nothing but one of the names for nature. But this beauty is an end in itself (not reducible to an author, an individual creation, etc.), in other words, it is equally contingent. This contingence, if we follow Emerson's reinterpretation of correspondence, also applies to our desire for beauty: "No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty" (*W*, I, 24). Emerson's complex argument thus turns upon itself: nature is an idealist origin that brings about thought, but it becomes its own end, because the processuality of thought itself is an expression of nature and itself functions as a form-giving of the 'unformed' flux of nature.

Nature and the *Bemühung* of correspondence

As we have seen already in the last chapter, this turning upon itself is the signature movement of Emerson's thought. Here, this movement underwrites his argument about art and nature and forms the basis of his discussion of philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg's notion "correspondence". In Chapter I of *Nature* ("Nature"), he starts his presentation of a theory of correspondence by way of a pronounced revision of the customary language of naturalists:

> "[F]or every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow-puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, – no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, - master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I

> find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable." (*W*, I, 9-10)

I am quoting this passage at full length because it contains, *in nuce*, both Emerson's criticism of standard naturalist terminology as well as his own elaboration of a theory of a more "radical correspondence". Revising the central idealist topos that says that nature is an extension of man, Emerson here reconceives of the relation of man and nature as an increasingly complex exchange. On the one hand, nature simply corresponds to the human because its flux is similar to the fluidity or malleability of our ordinary lives. On the other, however, nature may produce in us an experience that is extraordinary, that challenges everything we know. Emerson thus revises naturalist correspondence by enlarging the power of nature to disrupt and challenge, so that nature now becomes the "hieroglyphic of something in us" (*CS*, I, 299), as Emerson expresses it in a sermon of 1829.[3] In other words: Nature itself is a language, but one that expresses itself in hieroglyphs and consequently cannot be a stable ground upon which to establish our interpretations. Nature's language cannot be read, it has to be deciphered just like an unknown language. Emerson's later assertion that "[n]ature is only a mirror in which man is reflected colossally" (*W*, XII, 165) consequently identifies a riddle or a contingency ("the occult relation") at the heart of this correspondence. And it is this reconception of correspondence as a contingent relation, as something that cannot be contained by the two elements that go into it, that is at the heart of both *Nature* and Emerson's poetics in general. Just how powerful Emerson thinks this kind of correspondence can be is made explicit in the passage quoted above, when he insists that possesses the power to disrupt our acquired, ordinary emotional states so that it becomes possible to feel the paradox feeling of "being glad on the brink of fear."

When Emerson calls for an "original relation" at the outset of *Nature*, this is not the 'Adamic,' direct access to a world, it is, rather, a certain double crossing which perceives language as performing what is sought. An "original relation" would consequently mean that we give into both to nature's as well as language's eventfulness in order to make both new ways of life as well as a new life of tropes possible. The self-reflexive circle that necessarily develops along with our willingness to confront language's potential for meaning (and not simply its power to represent) is, I think, similar to what Stanley Cavell has said about Wittgenstein's remarks on philosophy's "*Bemühung*" (Wittgenstein 1989: vol. V, 39):

> "For what Wittgenstein means when he says that philosophy really is descriptive is that it is descriptive of 'our grammar', of 'the criteria we have' in understanding one another,

3 On Emerson's use of the symbol of hieroglyphics and its relation to Swedenborg's theory of the fall of man, see Lieselotte Dieckmann's *Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol* (Dieckmann 1970: 150-159)

> knowing the world, and possessing ourselves. Grammar is what language games are meant to reveal; it is because of this that they provide new ways of investigating concepts, and of criticizing traditional philosophy." (Cavell 2002: 56)

This kind of *Bemühung* produces an awareness that the exchange between ourselves and the world, between language and the world, runs in two ways: that on the one hand, our correspondence with the world is continually or necessarily dependant upon how the world requires us to come up with new meanings. On the other hand, however, these new meanings in turn create a changed world.

A great number of passages from Emerson's journals, notebooks, lectures, sermons, and addresses suggests that the problem of language and its use in philosophy is at the very heart of Emerson's thought. The indexes that Emerson himself compiled to his *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* offer long entries under headings such as "Language," "Eloquence," and "Rhetoric." The *Journals* offer lengthy entries on linguistic topics and the "Topical Notebooks" collect the standard nineteenth-century arguments about language under titles such as "Philosophy," "Theory of Poetry," and "Rhetoric." *Nature*, however, only collects these linguistic topics to finally reject the standard nineteenth-century view of language in the central Chapter IV, "Language," one of the crucial passages in Emerson's work. Emerson here takes up the standard linguistic argument about the origin of language from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in which Adam figures as the original namer. His theological training at Harvard would certainly have made Emerson familiar with this doctrine in which Adam's naming of the creatures in *Genesis* (2:19-20) figures as a situation in which the word and the thing are yet in a perfect correspondence. As Hans Aarsleff has argued, the "Adamic doctrine" (Aarsleff 1983: esp. 25-26, 42-83), popular in New England philosophy early in the nineteenth century, repeatedly returns to this *Urszene*. As Aarsleff points out, early philology not just in America imagines Adam as the first philosopher and Aarsleff quotes from John Locke's contemporaries John Webster and Robert South, the latter of which characterizes Adam as "a philosopher, which sufficiently appeared by his writing the nature of things upon their names; he could view essences in themselves, and read forms without the comment of their respective properties" (Aarsleff 1983: 59). Emerson, as passages in his journal suggeset, was also familiar with Jakob Böhme's elucidation of the doctrine in his *Mysterium Magnum* in which Adam functions as the originator of a perfect language that establishes a transparent connection between words and things (Boehme 1623).

The influence that this doctrine and, more generally, early American linguistics had on Emerson, can here not be documented in its entirety. It suffices to say that Emerson was heavily influenced in both the vocabulary and the framework of *Nature* by late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century linguistic thought and its positing of a correspondence between the external material world and the world of thought and spirit. What Böhme and other thinkers of correspondence theory

such as Guillaume Oegger and Emanuel Swedenborg – we find their books thoroughly annotated in Emerson's library –, what these thinkers called the "language of nature," suggested that language was a transparent medium, a vehicle effectively able establish a connection between the world and thought.[4] In *Nature*, in the chapter entitled "Language," Emerson challenges this conventional view of language as a transparent medium by way of positing three simple propositions to suggest that it is in fact "nature [that] is the vehicle of thought" (*W*, I, 25):

"1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit." (*W*, I, 25)

All of these propositions are in violation of nineteenth century linguistic theory that aims to clearly delimit spirit from nature with language as the human, quasi-transparent vehicle that connects the two. Emerson, on the other hand, refutes such a delimitation and effectively identifies a fundamental interaction between signs and natural facts. This interaction, however, can no longer be controlled by and in language, because what language is and what it means is itself contingent on this exchange. If the third proposition then identifies nature as the symbol of spirit, then spirit will obviously no longer be a stable place, but itself a process. This is further elaborated in chapter VII of *Nature* (" Spirit"), where Emerson argues

> "that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound, [nature] does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old." (*W*, I, 63-64)

Spirit is thus no longer the "supreme being" that governs how we approach nature. Rather, it is merely "supreme," because it is the place where nature's latency – or "unconscious," as Emerson phrases it – is transferred into a thought, figuration, or narrative. But because nature itself is "spiritual," because it is "putting forth through *us*," we are always already implied in nature and nature implied in us. Emerson's notion of correspondence consequently troubles any simple interaction of nature and spirit to suggest that there is a fundamental, but productive "discord" (*W*, I, 65) between the two. Somewhat esoterically revising the philosophical dictum of his time, he suggests that this relation precisely cannot be described from within a philosophical discourse. Rather, because the place of nature's "putting forth through us" is language, this mutual implication expresses itself poetically, as a figuration in

4 On Boehme and the "language of nature," see Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (1995: 182-185), and David Van Leer, *Emerson's Epistemology. The Argument of the Essays* (1986: 19-58); On Swedenborg's theory of correspondence and how it influenced the Transcendentalists, see, respectively, Alexander Kern, "The Rise of Transcendentalism" (1953) and Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalisist: An Anthology* (1950: 53). For a more general overview of the influence of correspondence theory on American literature, see Philip F. Gura's "Language and Meaning: An American Tradition" (1981).

language: "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind" (*W*, I, 32). But emblems and metaphors do not establish transparent correspondences, rather, they imply a fundamental transference. The medium of this transference is language. Emerson thus reformulates a notion of correspondence to suggest that the relation between the world and the human mind is not transparent: it is a relation that is always already bound up with the figurality of language. One could therefore argue that for Emerson Adam's fall is always already not just a fall from paradise but, rather, a fall into the metaphoricity or rhetoricity of language.

In *Nature*, Emerson's argument is not yet quite decisive. But it is obvious even here, how important the doctrine of correspondence was to him. Before we can more fully assess Emerson's reception and revision of Swedenborg's notion of correspondence in *Nature*, we need to take a brief detour to Emerson's most elaborate evaluation of Swedenborg in his lectures on *Representative Men*. This will help us to make sense of his rather condensed reinterpretation of Swedenborgian correspondence in *Nature*. In "Representative Men," after a number of exceptionally obscure passages about Abul Khain, Abu Ali Seena, and Bramins – mysticists that serve as a highly ironic pretext for Emerson's analysis of Swedenborg – and a condensed *tour de force* through historical formulations of mystic experience – "called […] ecstasy or absence," "a getting out of their bodies to think" (*W*, IV, 97) – and a short presentation of Swedenborg as the prime example of an "introverted mind" (*W*, IV, 98), Emerson presents Swedenborg's philosophy as nothing less than "a new religion in the world" (*W*, IV, 101). In fact, Emerson's praise of Swedenborg is enthusiastic: Swedenborg is described as "[o]ne of the missouriums and mastodons of literature" (*W*, IV, 103), "whose presence would flutter the gowns of an university" (*W*, IV, 103). He dismisses his own as well as the books of his contemporaries as "fragmentary," as mere "bonmots" while Swedenborg is praised as being "systematic": "all means are orderly given; his faculties work with astronomic punctuality […]" (*W*, IV, 103). Emerson quotes at length from Swedenborg's *Animal Kingdom* (Swedenborg 1843) and finally presents what he perceives to be Swedenborg's attempt to "attain the science of all sciences, to unlock the meaning of the world" (*W*, IV, 115). And it is precisely here, Emerson argues, that the phenomenon of correspondence comes into play:

> "In our doctrine of Representations and Correspondences we shall treat of both these symbolical and typical resemblances, and of the astonishing things which occur, I will not say in the living body only, but throughout nature, and which correspond so entirely to supreme and spiritual things that one would swear that the physical world was purely symbolical of the spiritual world; insomuch that if we choose to express any natural truth in physical and definite vocal terms, and to convert these terms only into the corresponding and spiritual terms, we shall by this means elicit a spiritual truth or theological dogma, in place of the physical truth or precept: although no mortal would have predicted that any thing of the kind could possibly arise by bare literal transposition; […] This symbolism pervades the living body." (*W*, IV, 115-6)

The passage from *Representative Men* makes explicit just how much Emerson takes from Swedenborg. But it has been overlooked that Emerson immediately sets about challenging the doctrine or idealism of Swedenborgian correspondence by adding that "[t]he fact thus explicitly stated is implied in all poetry, in allegory, in fable, in the use of emblems and in the structure of language" (*W*, IV, 116). This may seem like a minor addition when in fact it is a significant revision or even an outright dismissal of Swedenborg's notion of correspondence. "The fact thus explicitely stated" is what David Van Leer has called "Swedenborg's primitive notion of a parallelism between the two worlds of matter and spirit" (Van Leer 1986: 28). Van Leer is certainly right about the 'primitivism' of Swedenborg's notion of correspondence, but he himself misses the radical import of Emerson's addition when he maintains that Swedenborg's shortcoming in turn came to be a sort of founding stone for Emerson's philosophical thought. Obviously, van Leer is not interested in the linguistic dimension of Emerson's critique, because what the second half of Emerson's qualification effectively introduces into the parallelism of correspondence is precisely *language*, and it is by this introduction that Emerson dissolves the parallelism. It is only when we pay attention to this linguistic dimension of Emerson's rebuttal of Swedenborg's "bare literal transposition" (*W*, IV, 116) that we can ascertain how correspondence is now no longer guaranteed by an objective standard which would enable us to judge the representational value of our sensations. Rather, it is implied by our uses of language, as Emerson points out when he criticizes Swedenborg for limiting his insight to a theological problem: "This design of exhibiting such correspondences, which, if adequately executed, would be the poem of the world, […] was narrowed and defeated by the exclusively theologic direction which his inquiries took" (*W*, IV, 120). Emerson consequently calls Swedenborg's notion of correspondence "mystic" (*W*, IV, 121) and contends that "[t]he slippery Proteus [of nature] is not so easily caught" (*W*, IV, 121). He also insists that nature "is no literalist" and that the "dictionary of symbols" that would correspond to the totality of nature "is yet to be written" (*W*, IV, 121). Even tough heavily influenced by Swedenborg's writing, Emerson thus sees there a mysticism that is diametrally opposed to his insistence on flexibility, flux, and spontaneity. Thus he argues that "[t]hese books should be used with caution. It is dangerous to sculpture these evanescing images of thought" (*W*, IV, 132):

> "Swedenborg's system of the world wants central spontaneity […] and lacks power to generate life. There is no individual in it. The universe is a gigantic crystal, all whose atoms and laminæ lie in uninterrupted order, and with unbroken unity, but cold and still. […] There is an immense chain of intermediation, extending from centre to extremes, which bereaves every agency of all freedom and character. […] All his figures speak one speech. All his interlocutors Swedenborgise. […] The thousand-fold relation of men is not there. The interest that attaches in nature to each man, because he is right by his wrong, and wrong by his right, because he defies all dogmatising and classification, so many allowances, and contingences, and futurities, are to be taken into account, strong by his vices, often paralysed by his virtues, - sinks into entire

> sympathy with his society. This want reacts to the centre of the system. […] There is no lustre in that eye which gazes from the centre, and which should vivify the immense dependency of beings. (*W*, IV, 133-4)

Emerson *apropos* Swedenborg consequently imagines a philosophy that by investing too much in its systematics brings the world itself to a halt, a philosophy that by trying to establish an encompassing perspective on the world occasions a massive standstill both in the philosopher's text – so that "[a]ll his interlocutors Swedenborgise" – as well as in the world – that now lacks all "allowances, and contingences, and futurities." Swedenborg, Emerson argues, wants to establish a correspondence that steadfastedly interlocks the world and the philosopher's text so as to halt all exchange between the world and the text. Emerson therefore dismisses him as a "literalist" and maintains that we should look for a (more "radical") correspondence precisely in the way in which both the world and the text undergo a constant refiguration or reformulation. Emerson's insistence on the spontaneity of both the world and the philosopher's text is consequently not just a criticism of Swedenborg, it is much more than that, namely a task that Emerson sets before him. Before nature, Emerson argues, "[t]he human mind stands ever in perplexity" and he maintains that "[t]he reconciler has not yet appeared" (*W*, IV, 94), upholding the promise for a future meaning of the world.

Emerson's revision of Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences insists on the ambiguity of any verbal access to the world. Earlier, in his journals, Emerson still thought that in exemplary cases an ideal, Swedenborgian correspondence was possible. Hence, he characterizes Goethe as "as person who hated words that did not stand for things" (*J*, III, 314). In other places too, Goethe is defined as the gold standard of an author that "put[s] ever a thing for a word" (*W*, IV, 274). Later, however, Emerson dispenses with this standard when he allows for a fundamental "remoteness" between words and things: "There is every degree of remoteness form the line of things in the line of words," he remarks in a journal entry from 1835. As a consequence, we can only "approximate" truth in so "many words, hoping that one, if not another, will bring you as near to the fact as he is" (*J*, III, 492). The seeming maturity of language, its ability to "cover a thing" (*W*, IV, 276), is here replaced by an insight into its "young & unformed" state, so that "there are many things that refuse to be recorded" (*J*, III, 492). And in an entry in 1837, alluding to the atomic theory of eighteenth century physicist and astronomer Roger Joseph Boscovich, he records his skepticism in even stronger terms: "As Boscovich taught hat two particles of matter never touch, so it seems true that nothing can be described as it is. The most accurate picture is only symbols & suggestions of the thing but from the nature of language all remote" (*J*, IV, 266). Swedenborg, at least in Emerson's account, holds a literal transposition possible and therefore posits language as a transparent medium. Emerson, however, views "remoteness" itself as a quality of the "nature of language" itself.

A more "radical" correspondence

It is important to note that Emerson significantly revises this notion of a correspondence in spirit or ideality. Here, the correspondence is one that is established precisely via the process of figuration essential to language. Judith Butler has pointed out in a different context that this "performative moment" is the central discovery of philosophy early in the nineteenth century and that it is essential to the philosophy of Hegel. Her description of Hegel's complication of philosophy's procedure by language in his *Logic* is, I think, also applicable to Emerson:

> "In his *Logic*, Hegel argued that the dialectic consisted in the unity of apparent opposites – more precisely, in the logical and ontological relation of mutual implication that persists between ostensibly oppositional terms. When the dialectic no longer denotes the ontological unity of opposites or the logical principle of dialectical reversal, it no longer maintains its conventional meanings. The invocation of the dialectic becomes instead a performative moment in a language, an occasion in which the loss of metaphysical moorings clears the way for a poetic affirmation of what is." (Butler 1991: 269)

When he rephrases Swedenborg's notion of correspondence as a "radical" correspondence, Emerson introduces a similar moment of mediation or performance in and through language. Swedenborg's romantic or, with Emerson's term, "mystic" way of thinking, attempting to bring together apparent opposites (matter and mind, the thing and the word) in unity or continuity, that is, in correspondence, in Emerson becomes a moment of linguistic generation, a moment of figuration and 'metaphorisation.' This also implies an amendment of the procedure of dialectics in which progress is no longer merely the successful effort to subordinate and domesticate the negative: here negativity or that which is as yet unspecified enables advancement. Emerson could thus be said to open that famed backdoor of Hegelian semiology, even if he does it unawares and without the intention to explicitely criticize Hegel's system.

This introduction of what one could variously call simply language, or figurality, or semiology, in Emerson's critique of Swedenborg then explicitly turns on the matter of presentation: "When he mounts into the heaven, I do not hear its language. A man should not tell me that he has walked among the angels; his proof is, that his eloquence makes me one" (*W*, IV, 141-2). Emerson here draws attention to what is central to his notion of a more "radical correspondence": that poetic language, but also literature and philosophy, can, by way of a mobilization of figurality, by investing in the Vollzug of a tropology, itself produce an eventfulness that "invites us onward": "It is the best sign of a great nature, that it opens a foreground, and, like the breath of morning landscapes, invites us onward. Swedenborg is retrospective" (*W*, IV, 143).

The meanest word in Emerson's dictionary ("retrospective") then has its contrapunctual movement in the fluidity of the processes of writing and reading. And we as readers, in filling in, constructing the text, take part in an event, the event of the text, an activity that for Emerson stands in a "radical correspondence" to the way in which we interact or make sense of nature or our exterior reality. If writing "invites us onward" it does so by being invested in a process of "onward thinking" (Cavell 1972: 136), of *Verfertigung* or *Vollzug* that does not merely represent but present the experience of fluidity that for Emerson is characteristic of the "spontaneity" of nature. While he attests this kind of spontaneity to some writers – he mentions Jacob "Behmen" (Böhme) as the specimen of a writer whose style is "tremulous with emotion" (*W*, IV, 142) – Emerson clearly finds it lacking in Swedenborg, where "the entire want of poetry [...] betokens the disease, and, [...] is a kind of warning" (*W*, IV, 144). As Emerson argues:

> "It is remarkable that this man, who, by his perception of symbols, saw the poetic construction of things, and the primary relation of mind to matter, remained entirely devoid of the whole apparatus of poetic expression, which that perception creates" (*W*, IV, 143).

Maybe it is in difficult passages such as these that we find the imprint of Emerson's philosophy. Often ignored or simply overread, it functions as a kind of neuralgic point for his reformulation of Swedenborgian correspondence: Swedenborg, who had discovered the problem of the representational power of sensation – that subsequently became *the* central assumption and problem of pre-Kantian philosophy –, and who had concluded that our mind is symbolic of nature and external reality and *vice versa*, that is, that mind and matter are in a primary relation, discovers a principle of flux or change at work in both mind and matter. But Emerson then makes Swedenborg's (metaphysical) game null and void: by drawing attention to "the apparatus of poetic expression" Emerson turns away from the question of the phenomenality of nature and insists that the perception of our indebtedness to an outside reality is not a 'properly' ontological one but rather one that is established in our uses of language and, hence, *poetic*. Emerson further enforces this point when he concludes his dismissal of Swedenborg by the verdict that his "books have become a monument" (*W*, IV, 144): in its putting forward of a stable relation between word and thing, by giving an account, basically, of the orderliness of the universe, the philosophy *itself* is dead, "cold and still" (*W*, IV, 133). In Emerson, then, the impetus to find or develop a mode of writing that would guarantee the freedom of meaning, that would be irreducible to history, is not merely a philosophical problem but also an ethical concern.

Returning to the chapter "Language" in *Nature*, we find a similar deflation of Swedenborg's metaphysical or ontological argument. To start with, already the argumentative structure that Emerson comes up with makes explicit his departure form Swedenborgian correspondence. "Language" here is a subsection of nature,

that is, it is presented as an essential part of nature and not its opposite. For someone as deeply steeped in typology as Emerson, this certainly is not a mere negligence. Emerson then argues that because we are unable to give an objective standard which establishes a stable relation between our sensations and nature, we cannot "know whether the impressions they make on me correspond to outlying objects" (*W*, I, 47): the terminology of correspondence is thus made irrelevant. As Emerson states a few paragraphs later: "Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me" (*W*, I, 48). The signature of Emerson's 'theory' of correspondence consequently is to be found in the way in which language (or poetry) ceases to conform to John Locke's definition of language as mere "great Conduit" (Locke 1990: III, xi, 5). Language here is no longer an instrument or a medium enabling the transparent, facile exchange between the world of nature and that of spirit. Rather, he makes an all-encompassing *figurality* or *poiesis* the feature of a *Naturzustand* before its division into nature and spirit. The definition of a more "radical correspondence" precisely hinges on this figurality, on this poiesis. Thus he takes us on a journey back in history:

> "Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols. The same symbols are found to make the original elements of all languages. It has moreover been observed, that the idioms of all languages approach each other in passages of the greatest eloquence and power." (*W*, I, 29)

We consequently find in Emerson a Rousseauvian moment in which "the first language had to be figural" ("*Que le premier langage dut être figuré*") – an assertion that Rousseau's elaborates in the third chapter of his *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (Rousseau 1976: 381).[5] Man's fall, Emerson argues in a significant revision or reversal of Locke's argument about language as a corruption of "the Fountains of Knowledge, which are in Things themselves," is precisely his fall from language's figurality. When Emerson states that "[t]he corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language" (*W*, I, 29), he does precisely not mean to say that this corruption has to be conceived of as the becoming more figural of language. Rather, man's fall is his fall *from* figurality, and very much like what Nietzsche in *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne* termed the "Vergessen jener primitiven Metapherwelt" of language (*KSA*, I, 883.), his *forgetting* of the figurality of both language *and* nature:

> "The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary

5 On this Rousseauvian moment of figuration, see Paul de Man's *Blindness and insight* (1983: esp. 116-142); on the "first language" as "figural," see especially 133.

> desires [...] and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time the fraud is manifest, and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections." (*W*, I, 29-30)

The "fraud" of a "paper currency" is thus not caused by the disturbance of a stable relation of world and thing. Rather, it is the result of an overstabilization of precisely that relation so that, on the one hand, there is no more room for the creation of "new imagery" and, on the other, "old words" have not been affected by a change in the world. The result is a world in which the phenomenon of meaning has been exorcised. But this world, as we have seen, is "frozen," "cold and still".

Other than the doctrine of "representative words" that wanted to fasten words to things and thus establish a direct, unmediated correspondence that presented itself as the coincidence of spirit and matter, Emerson insists on a more "radical correspondence" (*W*, I, 29) that is brought about especially by language's figurality, by the way in which our access to reality is fundamentally and inevitably mediated by language. This insight into what one could call a hermeneutics – especially because it is not expressed as a systematics, because it is not the foundation of a philosophical system – for Emerson is what philosophy and literature are all about in the first place. Also, I want to maintain that Emerson's insight goes well beyond the linguistics and language philosophy of Emerson's time. It speaks of a fundamental mediation at work in our perception of the world but does not give in completely, as Stanley Cavell has shown, to the 'temptation' or 'risk' of scepticism. Rather, in Emerson it is exactly the *Unverbürgtheit* of our relation to the world, the fragility of our grip on the world that makes possible "newness" and "the way onward" (*W*, II, 319). For Emerson, any perception or 'reading' of the world is implicated in the precariousness of such a hermeneutic moment, it presents itself as our implication in a conversion or transition of figures. This kind of 'figuring' out the world, if I may say so, is a never-ending task, because we are continually both reading as well as misreading the world, that is, interpreting and perceiving the world. This kind of 'figuring' out, as Paul De Man has shown in *Allegories of Reading* (De Man 1979), is the form in which we participate in the world, and language's figurality is the necessary, unavoidable form that this participation takes.

Because our experience of the world is continually endangered, there can be no end to this conversation with the world, to this task of reading the world. As Emerson argues in "Experience": "The secret of the illusoriness [of life] is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us: Pero si muove" (*W*, III, 55). Thus language, the event of its shift of moods, registers, etc., enters into a "radical correspondence" with the event of the world, incalculable

and unforeseeable. Our use of language, our "convers[ion] in figures" (*W*, I, 29) consequently is not a medium, it is one of the principal ways in which we are in the world, it is, as Heidegger will argue, the primary form of our being-in-the-world. Emerson's "radical correspondence" expresses itself in the fact that language is not merely an image or representation of nature. Rather, it is an addition, a "second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree" (*W*, III, 22), it itself presents itself as a material event, whose unfolding produces precisely the excess of metaphoricity or figurality that turns nature from itself, that changes nature itself. Just as in Heidegger's early *Hermeneutik der Faktizität* (*GA* 63), then, every understanding or reading of the world produces its own event, it produces its own ground, is its own "facticity," as Heidegger expresses it. Emerson similarly accounts for the facticity of our uses of words in his journals: "Nature is a language & every new fact that we learn is a new word" (*J*, IV, 95). We must consequently understand that this correspondence can never remain a purely theoretical or systematical undertaking: it has to be itself performed continually in writing or reading. If Emerson conceives of nature itself as a text, then this performs again the kind of self-reflexive circle that we have already seen in previous chapters. Nature's self-reflexivity also functions as a debasement of origins because she "baptizes herself; and this through the metamorphosis again" (*W*, III, 22). But it is precisely in this disparagement of the importance of origins and in its commission to "metamorphosis" that nature enables change and progress both in the world as well as in the ways in which we read or understand the world. "We need change of objects" (*W*, III, 55), Emerson argues, so that nature may reintroduce precisely that poetic "spark" (*W*, III, 3) that the project of Western metaphysics had tried to systematically control and contain.

Emerson's "radical correspondence" leads to a sort of double crossing in which he conceives of language as coming forth from nature, but of nature itself as becoming language. This is what Emerson means when he speaks of nature as a "dictionary" (*W*, I, 32). The term "correspondence" in Emerson does therefore not merely signal a certain inheritance (namely that of Swedenborg's philosophy), it also presents a radical reformulation of what philosophy terms ontology, because it attempts to conceive of a way in which *the material itself is inscribed as a trope*. This is most explicitly elaborated in some of the descriptive passages in *Nature*.

> "I see the spectacle of morning from the hill- top over against my house, from daybreak to sunrise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How does Nature deify us with a few and cheap elements! Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria; the sunset and moonrise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams." (*W*, I, 17)

This is how this double crossing takes place: nature's "spectacle" (the advent of daybreak, the rising of the sun, etc.) becomes a spectacle of the text (the transition of images, the ways in which one trope occasions the next). As Emerson's fluid language proceeds from one image to the next, it reproduces nature's eventfulness so that "I seem to partake its rapid transformations." But in a next step, the text produces its own material event, as the succession of images occasions an event of the text itself. Eventually, this (textual) eventfulness feeds back again into the world or nature, now itself transfigured (nature's dawn is now "Assyria," its night "Germany," etc.). As Emerson argues in "The Poet": "[Man] filled nature with his overflowing currents" (*W*, I, 75). *In nuce*, the sentence contains Emerson's complex poetological programme of a radical "correspondence" between nature and poetry: A figural description of nature, that of the overflowing stream, comes to denote human thought but is then fed back into nature. Nature thus calls upon us to abandon ourselves to a "convers[ion] in figures" (*W*, I, 29) but simultaneously, our conversion by way of figures changes nature itself since it itself forms a material event that possesses its very own facticity.

If we again look at the passage quoted above, we can try to give a more detailed account of Emerson's rhetorical procedure in order to see how he conceives of this event of the text. In this passage from *Nature*, taken from the subsection on 'Language,' Emerson conceives of the rhetor as undergoing three separate stages: First, the speaker is overwhelmed by the sublime moment of nature's spectacle. Second, this spectacle is then translated into a succession of figures, a succession that also induces a sublime moment in the reader, urging him to enter into a process of interpretation similar to that of the speaker. Emerson consequently takes the rhetor's habitual relation to the world to be overwhelmed by nature's spectacle; only by coming up with a series of tropes can he again give an account of the world. Third, because our abandonment to a process of figuration is incalculable (see, for example, the transition from "cloud" to "fishes" to "silent sea"), it produces its own evidence, the text's event feeds back into the world because it allows for a new relation to the world, because it changes the way in which we interact with the world.

In the continuation of the passage – after drawing attention to danger of language's becoming a "paper currency" (*W*, I, 30), that is, meaningless abstraction – Emerson argues that it is "wise men" who can "pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it is a man in alliance with truth and God" (*W*, I, 30). But this correspondence is again not simply a result of some kind of simple analogy. Rather it is re-established precisely in "[t]he moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts, and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images" (*W*, I, 30-31). This then for Emerson is the sign of "good writing" or "brilliant discourse":

> "A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find that always a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, contemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought. Hence, good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. This imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is proper creation. It is the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made." (*W*, I, 30)

Emerson thus conceives of the disruption of our ordinary relation to the world as a moment of the sublime, but he maintains that this happens in or through the medium of language, namely when "our discourse rises above the ground line." Thus invested with passion and thought, language immediately undergoes a process of refiguration, the speaker "clothes his thought in images", in other words, his passion expresses itself precisely by way of a transmutation in which the inflammation of passion becomes image or trope. And again, the passage here performs what it describes: the associative sequence of images that Emerson provides functions as a *Vollzug* of the inflamed passion of the orator and transfers it onto the reader, who, by following some of the sudden twists of the argument, himself experiences a rapid change of moods. And it is precisely when language overtakes us, when our discourse becomes "exalted" or "inflamed," that is, when we are exposed to the process of figuration and when we rise above the common ground of our existence, that we may assert what it means to be a poet and, for that matter, human.

We can find another example of this crossing or correspondence in the third Chapter of *Nature* ("Beauty") where Emerson writes about the unpredictability of the weather to himself engage in a rhetorical procedure that produces its very own unpredictable materiality. Here, Emerson again performs rhetorically what he describes when his description of a succession of different weather phenomena is enhanced by a succession of images that are themselves only loosely connected:

> "Not less excellent, except for our less susceptibility in the afternoon, was the charm, last evening, of a January sunset. The western clouds divided and subdivided themselves into pink flakes modulated with tints of unspeakable softness; and the air had so much life and sweetness, that it was a pain to come within doors. What was it that nature would say? Was there no meaning in the live repose of the valley behind the mill, and which Homer or Shakspeare could not re-form for me in words? The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for their background, and the stars of the dead calices of flowers, and every withered stem and stubble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music." (*W*, I, 17-8)

The notion of a "mute music" is here to be applied both to the phenomena that Emerson describes as well as to the images that he uses to render them in the text. Both, the real phenomena and the textual images, can only figure that which "nature would say". As in other places the idea or notion of a representational flux here coincides with an insight into the failure of language to entirely re-present what it describes. The abruptness of many of Emerson's transitions instigates the

event of the text precisely because it is discontinuous, full of gaps, etc. The eventfulness of Emerson's text is consequently not just the recirculation of "odds and ends borrowed from a bizarre assortment of poets, scientists, philosophers, and visionaries," as Packer has phrased it (Packer 1982: 25). The passages quoted above make explicit how Emerson's procedure builds not only upon the recirculation of texts he quotes, rather, the decontextualization of sentences from the journal and from earlier lectures allows Emerson to "shock [us] out of patience" (*J*, V, 83), to defamiliarize our professionalized ways of reading. Emerson styles himself to be "a rocket manufacturer" (*J*, VII, 247) and he understands that "[w]ho can make a good sentence can make a good book" (*J*, V, 79). As Enrico Cadava points out with regards to the importance of the sentence in Emerson, his language does work "not by the accumulation of multiple associations around a strongly held center, but through the mobilization of terms from one shifting context to another. This mobilization names an engagement with changing historical and political relations" (Cadava 1997: 21).[6]

Stanley Cavell, too, has shown an interst in the weight that Emerson's writing places on the single sentence:

> "I have taken the familiar experience of Emerson's writing as leaving the individual sentences to shuffle for themselves to suggest that each sentence of a paragraph of his can be taken to be its topic sentence. I welcome the consequent suggestion that his essays are collections of equals rather than hierarchies of dependants" (Cavell 2005, 244)

Cavell argues that by juxtaposing seemingly contradictory or even unconnected sentences, Emerson effectively challenges philosophy's obsession with argumentative consistency in favour of an attention to how meaning is produced as a result of a process of figuration (and not a systematics). Cavell argues that Emerson's "words become specimens of a totality of significance arrived at otherwise than by a system (philosophical or scientific or narrative) of which Emerson felt incapable" (Cavell 2005, 270). Cavell sees his sentences as "fashionings of discontinuity", and he likens Emerson's writing to that of Wittgenstein, because he shares with Wittgenstein an interest in "the medium of philosophy as fragment, in counterpoise to its medium as system" (Cavell 2005, 270). Emerson's stylistic choices are consequently not mere eccentricities: by taking recourse to what Barbara Packer has called a "more disruptive" (Packer, Emerson's Fall, 27) editorial technique, he effectively manages to make obvious or even to challenge philosophy's natural tendency for systematicity. Instead of the build-up of systematic meaning, I want to argue, Emerson elaborates the power of

6 For an account of Emerson's struggle with the tradition of American rhetoric in Nature, see Alan D. Hodder's *Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation. Nature, the Reader, and the Apocalypse Within* (1989: esp. Chapter 4, "Rhetoric of Revelation," 103-155), for an overview of the Transcendentalists' interest in rhetorics, see Matthiessen, *American Renaissance. Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1968: esp. 14-70).

the sentence as a kind of *Gestalt*, as the expression of a significance that is not yet controlled or governed by an overarching system. "[T]he energy of Emerson's characteristic sentence is centripetal" (Hodder, Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation, 121) as Hodder puts it. Cavell suggests that because they lack the support of a system that would guarantee their meaning, Emerson's sentences need to say everything at once, while every sentence needs to start out from scratch: "[I]mplicitly everything about Emerson's practice as a writer bespeaks this sense of aggregation and juxtaposition – from his culling from his journals for individual essays, to the sense of his sentences as desiring to stand apart from one another, each saying everything, each starting over" (Cavell 2005, 270-271).

More often than not, the significance of a sentence in Emerson's essays is in excess of the argumentative structure that the essay develops. But in Emerson's essay, this is never just a stylistic shortcoming or inadequacy: when Emerson transfers paragraphs from his journal or from earlier lectures, he sometimes leaves them intact, and sometimes he breaks them down and redistributes their sentences to different paragraphs, sometimes to different essays altogether. As Packer argues, "this process never entirely effaces the original style of the sentences, their juxtaposition with other similarly decontextualised sentences produces a perpetual series of small shocks or jolts" (Packer, Emerson's Fall, 27). This procedure is intimately connected to Emerson's interest in philosophy, that is, it is precisely how an element of what I have called rhetoricity or poeticity is introduced into the systematic language of philosophy. As Cavell points out in an imaginative passage in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, this procedure is later adopted also by Thoreau, who similarly insists on the power of sentences to "turn us around":

> "Thoreau learned from Emerson to make sentences that may attract us by their beauty or their curiosity, and at the same time seem to play with our desire for some transformative understanding. He sometimes depicts this process as turning us around (both alluding to what has to happen to the prisoners in Plato's cave if they are to find the way out, and invoking the idea of turning found in the concept of conversion); sometimes he says we need to see that we are lost (that is, to recognize perdition in order to be moved to find ourselves); sometimes he shows us how to turn the world upside down in order to reorient ourselves." (Cavell 2005: 220-21)

I also take Cavell to imply here that Emerson's procedure also puts special weight not only on the single sentence, but more generally on processes of figuration that are in excess of the system of references and cross-references that a text establishes. Cavell also mentions "the power that Emerson precisely directs against fixated form, namely the power of turning our words against our words, to make them ours" and argues, that what Emerson "calls his essays accomplishes this task" (Cavell 2005: 8).

Contemporary critics of Emerson's writing were well aware of his essays' special attention to that which was not reducible to standard forms of the typological arguments. Francis Bowen, in a 1837 review of Nature, wrote:

> "We find beautiful writing an sound philosophy in this little work; but the effect is injured by occasional vagueness of expression, and by a vein of mysticism, that pervades the writer's whole course of thought. The highest praise that can be accorded to it, is, that it is a *suggestive* book, for no one can read it without tasking his faculties to the utmost, and relapsing into fits of severe meditation. [...] The reader feels as in a disturbed dream, in which shows of surpassing beauty are around him, and he is conversant with disembodied spirits, yet all the time he is harassed by an uneasy sort of consciousness, that the whole combination of phenomena is fantastic and unreal." (Miller 1950: 174)

Most probably, Emerson would have liked the review. In any event, the mood which Bowen describes as being set up in *Nature*, foreshadows that of "Experience", where, likewise, "sleep lingers [...] about our eyes" and "ghost-like we glide through nature" (*W*, III, 45). Emerson was obviously well aware that his essays focus their strength in the aphoristic, in the apostrophic, descriptive, or rhetorical sentence, that is, in the "fragmentary" effect of sentences". In a journal entry from 1834, he already thinks about the central importance of the sentence: "Mr. Coleridge has written well on this matter of Theory in his *Friend* [...] A true method has no more need of firstly, secondly, etc., than a perfect sentence has of punctuation. I tells its own story, makes its own feet, creates its own form. It is its own apology" (*J*, III, 295-96). And in a letter to Carlyle, shortly before the publication of his first series of essays in 1841, he acknowledges a certain lack of structure in his planned publication: "In a fortnight or three weeks my little raft will be afloat. Expect nothing more of my powers of construction, - no ship-building, no clipper, smack, nor skiff even, only boards and logs tied together" (*CEC*, 291). And, in another, earlier letter to Carlyle, he summarizes his editorial technique and method of composition as follows: "Here I sit and read and write with very little system and as far as regards composition with the most fragmentary result: paragraphs incompressible each sentence an infinitely repellent article" (*CEC*, 185).

Because of its peculiar stylistic procedures, Emerson's rhetorics involves the reader to the point where it threatens his security. And while it may not have been Emerson's intention in *Nature* to place his reader "in a disturbed dream" as Bowen calls it, he certainly goes a long way to unsettle the reader's security. For Emerson it was crucial, to forego the worn-out terms of tradition (of typology, of Unitarian doctrine, etc.) and to replace it with some sort of "uneasy sort of consciousness", as his early reviewer Bowen experiences it. As he later expresses it in "Circles," in one of his typically apodictic sentences: "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them" (W, II, 320). Incompleteness or "suggestiveness," as Bowen terms it, is thus not a mark of a stylistic failure in Emerson's essays. Rather, it is a sign of the essays' effectivity in engaging the reader in a process of actively co-producing the meaning of the text. This is why the inconsistency and, partly, redundancy of Emerson's essays is not simply an eccentricity. It is a conscious choice that means to expose the illusion of

an extratextual reality as well as to displace the philosophical categories and traditional determinants that normally guarantee our facile communication with a text. As he explains in a passage of "Self-Reliance":

> "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day." (*W*, II, 57)

Emerson's declaration of nonconformity here in "Self-Reliance" obviously also forms part of the larger project of antinomianism in American culture. But what I want to draw attention to here, is how Emerson delegates the responsibility for his texts' production and significance to his reader. It is the reader who will finally have to decide whether his texts are to be read as philosophical tracts, as polemics, as sermons, as literary exercises, etc. And, as Emerson argues, every text speaks differently to different readers:

> "'Tis the good reader that makes the good book; a good head cannot read amiss: in every book he finds passages which seem confidences or asides hidden from all else and unmistakably meant for his ear; the profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader; the profoundest thought or passion sleeps as in a mine, until it is discovered by an equal mind and heart" (*W*, VII, 296).

A similar comment can be found in "Representative Men" where Emerson argues that the role of the reader is generally underrated: "We have few readers, many spectators and hearers" (*W*, IV, 193). The reader effectively fills in the blanks in Emerson's essays. As Hodder points out, his essays are meant to provoke in the root sense of calling forth: "to stimulate in others what was productive in oneself. Indeed, for Emerson, to provoke meant to procreate" (Hodder 1989: 106). But the writer does not mobilize language merely in order to entertain but rather in order to stimulate the movement of the mind. As Emerson phrases it in "The American Scholar": "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire" (*W*, I, 89).

Emerson thus envisions the reader's responsivity to or, again, correspondence with the rhetoric processes that a text unfolds. Other than the textual system in which Emerson had been trained – typology, that attempted to establish a stable system of exchange between the stories of the Old Testament and their allegorical return in contemporary American scripture –, we find in his essays a mobilization of rhetoric procedures that combine to effect a radically new poetics of immediacy or, to use Emerson's terms, of "surprise," "shock," and "revelation." Emerson himself states that one of the aims of his essays is to inspire "new activity": "A wise writer will feel that the ends of study and composition are best answered by announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit" (W, I, 70). As a consequence, Emerson

always places his emphasis on what he terms "power" or "energy" and not so much on the structure of the final product. This is also why I think Hodder is right when he suggests that Emerson's texts are "virtual" (Hodder 1989: 107): They call upon the reader to go along with the movement and surprising turns of the text. Emerson knows, however, that his essays cannot entirely plan this participation of the reader. But clearly Emerson's peculiar use of the sentence as an "infinitely repellent particle" (*CEC*, 185) is meant to precipitate this participation insofar as it asks the reader to cooperate in the production of the text.

The incoherence or incongruity of Emerson's writing, its 'unsystematicity' in philosophical terms, is thus – being consciously planned as a movement of rhetorics – both an intended result as well as – being delegated to the reader – an incalculable process. As a wilful abandonment to processes of figuration and rhetorics it makes correspondence possible. But this correspondence remains a matter of words and, thus, by changing language, Emerson attempts to change also what is beyond language. And because language conditions the way in which we make sense of the world, correspondence suggests that we can also change the ways in which we make sense of the world. On the other hand, however, because this wilful abandonment through language confronts language's full potential for rhetoricity, it remains, in the last instance, uncontrollable or ungovernable by the poet or writer. But in Emerson, as we have seen before, it is precisely this unforeseeability that makes yet another meaning (of the world, of nature, etc.) possible. Emerson's injuction in the "Prospects" chapter of *Nature,* "build therefore your own world" (W, I, 76), is consequently not so much a matter of origination, it is a matter of an *engagement in and with language*.

Significantly, then, Emerson's project for a reformulation of 'America' is again invested in the (hermeneutic) problem of coming to account for prior uses of language. By way bringing old sayings into new contexts and by recirculating sentences from his own writing he attempts to effect unprecedented combinations in which these sayings and sentences will make another, different, or new sense. This also means that he departs form an ideal of (hermeneutic) intelligibility because the abandonment to rhetorical processes means a debasement of *Verständlichkeit*, that remains, essentially, a model of instrumentality or intentionality. As Emerson points out in "Method of Nature":

> "The universal nature, too strong for the petty nature of the bard, sits on his neck and writes through his hand; so that when he seems to vent a mere caprice and wild romance, the issue is an exact allegory. Hence Plato said that 'poets utter great and wise things which they do not themselves understand'." (W, II, 34)

The "method" of nature

But again, it is important to maintain here that this does not mean that Emerson's writing cannot or does not want to be historical. Nature as a repository of an unorganized force, of the undecidable, is precisely necessary to make history and the writing of history possible. What happens between "build therefore your own world" and a much more cautionary note in the journal dating from January 10, 1832 and explaining that "the difficulty is that we do not make a world of our own but fall into institutions already made and have to accommodate ourselves to them to be useful at all" (*J*, III, 318), has to be understood precisely in rhetorical terms: writing, in Emerson, is always already connected to the problem of history, because it alone holds the potential to refigure the ways in which we view or write our history. But because we can never completely loosen the grip of the received language, the rewriting of our history will always be both: a quotation and a refiguration. And it is by entering into a "radical correspondence" with the flux of nature that we are most likely to come up with new figurations of or for history. As a consequence, Emerson at times dismisses the 'written' history of his times and calls upon Americans to see their implication in "another history," in "the external world" and in "nature," as he argues in "History":

> "But along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward, – that of the external world, – in which he is not less strictly implicated. He is the compend of time; he is also the correlative of nature. His power consists in the multitude of his affinities, in the fact that his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being." (*W*, II, 35-6)

To enter into a "radical correspondence" thus means to see that "man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots, whose flower and fruitage is the world" (*W*, II, 36). This attention does not mean that we can give a total account of our situation or position in the world, but it implies that what had hitherto not been paid attention to can effectively become the nucleus of a new figuration of our history. It is in writing that we can disturb the sedimentations of history and, potentially, refigure it. But again, this process is not something that we can predetermine: "No man can antedate his experience, or guess what faculty or feeling a new object shall unlock, any more than he can draw to-day the face of a person whom he shall see to-morrow for the first time" (*W*, II, 38).

Entering into a more "radical correspondence" therefore opens the possibility that our history is not simply there, but the result of "creative" reading and writing:

> "I will not now go behind the general statement to explore the reason of this correspondency. Let it suffice that in the light of these two facts, namely, that the mind is One, and that nature is its correlative, history is to be read and written. Thus in all ways does the soul concentrate and reproduce its treasures for each pupil. He, too, shall pass through the whole cycle of experience. He shall collect into a focus the rays of nature. History no longer shall be a dull book. It shall walk incarnate in every just

> and wise man. You shall not tell me by languages and titles a catalogue of the volumes you have read. You shall make me feel what periods you have lived." (*W*, II, 38)

In yet another challenge of the doctrine of representative words, Emerson thus argues that he is ashamed at "what a shallow village tale our so-called History is" (*W*, II, 40) and he proposes:

> "Broader and deeper we must write our annals, – from an ethical reformation, from an influx of the ever new, ever sanative conscience, – if we would truly express our central and wide-related nature, instead of this old chronology of selfishness and pride to which we have too long lent our eyes. Already that day exists for us, shines in on us at unawares, but the path of science and of letters is not the way into nature. The idiot, the Indian, the child, and unschooled farmer's boy stand nearer to the light by which nature is to be read, than the dissector or the antiquary." (*W*, II, 40)

Correspondence, consequently, in Emerson means the abandonment to the variable, unformed forces of nature, to something that has not yet been poured into the cast of history and therefore holds the potential for change, holds the power to even rewrite that "old chronology." The contingency or undecidability of nature, the fact that it is "unaware" of our doings is then precisely the condition of the possibility of change and, thus, history. And herein also lies the central significance of the work of art, of its more "radical" correspondence with nature: it can offer such an experience of the undecidable, too. In the third chapter of *Society and Solitude,* "Art," Emerson spells out this correspondence as "active operation":

> "There is but one Reason. The mind that made the world is not one mind, but the mind. Every man is an inlet to the same, and to all of the same. And every work of art is a more or less pure manifestation of the same. Therefore we arrive at this conclusion, which I offer as a confirmation of the whole view, that the delight which a work of art affords, seems to arise from our recognizing in it the mind that formed Nature, again in active operation. It differs from the works of Nature in this, that they are organically reproductive. This is not; but spiritually it is prolific by its powerful action on the intellects of men. Hence it follows that a study of admirable works of art sharpens our perceptions of the beauty of Nature; that a certain analogy reigns throughout the wonders of both [...]" (*W*, VII, 50)

What Emerson terms "active operation" is thus the power (attested to both nature and the work of art) to suggest a certain eventfulness, to suggest, again and again, that something is still in progress, *im Vollzug*. The central term with which Emerson chooses to illustrate this correspondence between art and nature is "analogy": It makes obvious that Emerson thinks of this correspondence always already in aesthetic terms. Significantly enough, both the processes of nature and art, as extensions of each other, and if described in aesthetic terms, form "one Reason" or "one mind" that is all about a potential to instigate change while itself not becoming a sedimented form. This also goes to show why Emerson sees art at work in fields that we would not normally subsume to it:

> "Herein is the explanation of the analogies which exist in all the arts. They are the reappearance of one mind, working in many materials to many temporary ends. Raphael paints wisdom; Handel sings it, Phidias carves it, Shakspeare writes it, Wren builds it, Columbus sails it, Luther preaches it, Washington arms it, Watt mechanizes it. Painting was called 'silent poetry'; and poetry, 'speaking painting.' The laws of each art are convertible into the laws of every other." (*W*, VII, 52)

We begin to see how Emerson's repeated references to this kind of radicalized correspondence take him a long way from the idealism and naivety of Swedenborgian correspondence and form the framework for his careful elaboration of the respective quandaries of writing and historical understanding. Here, the focus lies not so much on seeing, establishing or documenting this correspondence, rather, it lies on uncovering a potential that will make it feasible to conceive of history as something that is read and written "actively and not passively" (*W*, II, 8). In other words: the condition of the possibility of history and writing needs to be sought in language's potential for *poiesis*, because history itself is in Emerson, as Cadava has argued, nothing but a "palimpsest of several shifting figures" (Cadava 1997: 94). In Emerson, as Cadava continues, "writing forms an essential part of the motion that names nature and that nature names" (Cadava 1997: 94). Nature thus is not simply an origin that occasions writing, it is itself inherently coupled with writing so that the process of writing can only be described by way of a recourse to nature and that of nature, on the other hand, must be conceived of as an extension of writing. This is why the natural world, as Emerson conceives of it, is itself suffused by the signs of writing. See for example this passage in "Goethe, or, The Writer":

> "Nature will be reported. All things as engaged in writing their history. The planet, the pebble, goes attended by its shadow. The rolling rock leaves its scratches on the mountain; the river its channel in the soil [...] The falling drop makes its sculpture in the sand or the stone. Not a foot steps into the snow or along the ground, but prints, in characters more or less lasting, a map of its march. Every act of the man inscribes itself in the memories of his fellows and in his own manners and face. The air is full of sounds; the sky, of tokens; the round is all memoranda and signatures, and every object covered over with hints which speak to the intelligent." (*W*, II, 261)

This kind of poetic correspondence is also fleshed out in "The Poet", where Emerson explains that "[l]anguage is fossil poetry" and argues that "[a]s the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin" (*W*, III, 22). And just as the "etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture" (*W*, III, 22) we need to remember the poetic origins of our words so that our tropes and fables will not become sedimented forms, "immortal sign[s]" (*W*, II, 9) that loose the power to engender change:

> "For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal

> warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem." (*W*, III, 9)

This conception of language consequently negates all aspirations for historical truth in writing. It conceives of history itself as a "vanishing allegory" (*J*, II, 435) and wants to preserve an attention to how it is poetically produced, i.e. as a result of a process of figuration that continually erodes itself.

"Images, tropes, [...] which have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin": to effect the defamiliarization of history's "allegory," one would have to expose history as being figural itself or revert the kind of "Vergessen jener primitiven Metapherwelt" of language (*KSA*, I, 883.) that Nietzsche holds to be philosophy's fundamental (positivist and historicist) mistake. It comes as no surprise, then, that Nietzsche would take up Emerson's point and elaborate it in more detail in *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*:

> "Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden, und die nach langem Gebrauche einem Volke fest, canonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, dass sie welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind, Münzen, die ihr Bild verloren haben und nun als Metall, nicht mehr als Münzen in Betracht kommen." (*KSA*, I, 881-2)

As Enrico Cadava has shown, both Emerson and Nietzsche are interested in the process of writing because it can be a place in which the sedimentations of history are disturbed.

> "Nietzsche and Emerson suggest that a genealogy of historical truth would reveal its origins not only in metaphor but in the progressive erosion of metaphor. In their terms, a history founded on facts would correspond to the process whereby, in the face of the metaphorical sedimentation of historical concepts and truths, a fact is asserted nevertheless through the erasure of the metaphor in which it was born. History would be a name for this obliteration of figures or tropes." (Cadava 1997: 9)

More strongly than Nietzsche, however, Emerson insists that once we engage in a process of writing, once we abandon ourselves to language, we necessarily also encounter its metaphoricity, its *Eigensinn*. Emerson's poetological programme can never become instrumental (in securing America's change, language's representativity, etc.). What Emerson concretizes as his methodological principle, the "*method of nature*" (*W*, I, 197), thus is not a method at all, because it describes precisely how philosophy must give up on its claim for originality and transparency and itself engage in a process of figuration. This is why the presentation of his "method" in "The Method of Nature" includes an elaboration of how language's use of figures and tropes necessarily torpedoes his own attempt at methodological consistency. As he argues in "The Method of Nature":

> "There is an intrinsic defect in the organ. Language overstates. Statements of the infinite are usually felt to be unjust to the finite, and blasphemous. Empedocles undoubtedly spoke a truth of thought, when he said, 'I am God;' but the moment it was out of his

> mouth, it became a lie to the ear; and the world revenged itself for the seeming arrogance, by the good story about his shoe." (*W*, I, 198-9)

The fable of Empedocles' ill-fated apotheosis speaks of the eventfulness of language itself, because his assertion ("I am God") is refigured in the moment in which he utters it. No writer or orator can attain control of this "defect" of language, as one utterance or trope is necessarily refigured by the one that comes after it. Consequently, and if we follow Emerson, language and its processes of figuration are adequate to a nature that is primeval and "aboriginal." But this also means that nature and language can no longer serve, as in Western metaphysics, as origins. The language that nature produces is unpredictable and "defective" – in the sense that it always 'defects' or strays from the meaning intended for it by the speaker. It can thus never produce truth or the ideal poem but, rather, only another mistranslation of some ideal poem that was never and will never be written: "we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem". But it is precisely by way of this "defection" or mistranslation that language corresponds to nature, to its plasticity, malleability and spontaneity.

> "The method of nature: who could ever analyze it? That rushing stream will not stop to be observed. We can never surprise nature in a corner; never find the end of a thread; never tell where to set the first stone. […] The wholeness that we admire in the order of the world, is the result of infinite distribution. Its smoothness is the smoothness of the pitch of the cataract. Its permanence is a perpetual inchoation. Every natural fact is an emanation, and that from which it emanates is an emanation also, and from every emanation is a new emanation." (*W*, I, 199)

For Emerson, nature's eventfulness, its perpetual but unpredictable renewal, is a "metaphysical and eternal spring that no chemistry, no mechanics, can account for" (*W*, II, 200). And he argues that "a mysterious principle of life must be assumed, which not only inhabits the organ, but makes the organ" (*W*, II, 200). This kind of "incessant self-registration" (*W*, IV, 262), as Emerson calls it in "Goethe, or, The Writer," therefore constitutes both nature as well as writing as processes that are inherently self-reflexive, that is, producing the very ground from which they spring. Both describe and simultaneously perform a constant beginning or a continual metamorphosis: In nature, "[a]ll is nascent, infant. […] [A]ll seems just begun; remote aims are in active accomplishment. […] [T]endency appears on all hands […] [T]otal nature […] is becoming somewhat else; is in rapid metamorphosis" (*W*, II, 203).

Emerson's "method of nature" is consequently not so much concerned with a 'method' *stricto sensu*, because his definition of nature hinges precisely upon the observation that there is no discernible pattern, course of action, etc. implied by nature. Rather, it hopes to find a language or, rather, an *écriture* and a rhetorics that will respond to nature's "redundancy or excess of life" (*W*, II, 204). But each of these *écritures* can, inevitably, merely be a contingent or supplementary

response to the world's excess: "Each individual soul is such, in virtue of its being a power to translate the world into some particular language of its own" (*W*, II, 206).[7] The impression that nature makes on us necessarily remains a "peculiarity" (*W*, II, 204) because this "particular language" always necessitates yet another instance of miswriting and the final "conversation with nature is still unsung" (*W*, I, 170). We then find here a confirmation of the 'supplementary' character of all American writing that I have already hinted at in a previous Chapter: If America "is a poem in our eyes" (*W*, III, 38), this is because it continually miswrites and supplements itself precisely by virtue of being a poem, that is, a kind of writing and reading.

Contrary to definitions of art that stress its permanence, Emerson is interested in the ways in which art responds to the spontaneous, the unforeseeable, etc. Thus he argues, again in "The Method of Nature":

> "What is best in any work of art, but that part which the work itself seems to require and do; that which the man cannot do again, that which flows from the hour and the occasion, like the eloquence of men in a tumultuous debate? It was always the theory of literature, that the word of a poet was authoritative and final. He was supposed to be the mouth of a divine wisdom." (*W*, I, 210)

For Emerson, the sign of genius is to be found in that "which the work itself seems to require," that is, again not in some kind of artistic control by the author over his text, but rather in the ways in which he "abandons" the creation of his work to the eventfulness of the occasion (the "tumultuous debate") and to the radical contingency inherent to the process of literary figuration ("that which the man cannot do again"). While every man or writer may be "articulate," it is "genius" that fulfils nature's potential, that mediates or translates its "mute music" (*W*, I, 18) by refiguring it in the process of literary creation. Again, however, this process of figuration is radically removed from the writer's control: "Nature is a mute, and man, her articulate speaking brother [...] Yet when Genius arrives, its speech is like a river; it has no straining to describe, more than there is straining in nature to exist" (*W*, II, 218).

In his reformulation of his own earlier poetic theory (in *Nature*), Emerson draws attention to the fact that the American translation, conversion or displacement of past translations or writings happens on the margin, at the horizon of a future yet to come, of a projected meaning that has never been or, rather, will never have been realized. This is why "[e]loquence shows the power and possibility of man" (*W*, VIII, 112) as Emerson argues in "Eloquence". The orator "can paint what has occurred and what must occur, with such clearness to a company, as if they saw it

7 I am using the term supplementary here according to Jacques Derrida's definition who argues in *Of Grammatology* that "if supplementarity is a necessarily indefinite process, writing is the supplement par excellence since it proposes itself as the supplement of the supplement, sign of a sign, taking the place of a speech already significant" (1976: 281).

done before their eyes" (*W*, VIII, 112-3). "Then recall the delight that sudden eloquence give, – the surprise that the moment is so rich." (*W*, VIII, 113). Genial creation requires the unforeseeable suddenness of the poetic or rhetorical moment, something that occurs unexpectedly "before our eyes." And it is important to remember that Emerson, as we have seen in Chapter Three, defines both nature as well as America in exactly these terms, as "fluxational symbol[s]" (*W*, III, 34), that is: tropes, continually being refigured "before our eyes", so that we cannot fix our perspective on them. The (American) language that expresses this conundrum is not so much original or genetic, rather, it is transformational and tropic, in other words: poetic. We consequently also see that we need to read Emerson's qualification that "America is a poem in our eyes" as a chiastic statement: America is poetry and poetry is America, that is, the possibility of America is bound up with the possibility of poetry. The difficulty of Emerson rhetorical programme consequently lies in the fact that it presents us with a double inscription: it transfers images of nature onto the process of writing, so that writing itself comes to express the malleability or transitionality that Emerson identifies as characteristic of nature. Emerson's poetics thus describes a kind of hermeneutic circle in which genius "is itself a mutation of the thing it describes" (*W*, II 219), so that genius itself writes the very stage on which its performance takes place. 'Genial' poetic or artistic creation can consequently only happen when the production of text (of the work of art, etc.) establishes a correspondence, becomes contemporaneous with the event of the present's unfolding. Emerson again uses the analogy of the Daguerreotype to stress the fragility and volatility of this moment of artistic creation: "In writing the casting moment is of greatest importance, just as it avails not in Daguerre portraits that you have the very man before you, if the expression has escaped" (*J*, VI, 94).

In Emerson's revision of nineteenth century symbolism and the idealist assertions associated with it, language goes beyond itself to suggest a peculiar kind of self-engendering or, as Emerson terms it, "self-registration". Emerson's writing is a joyous, exuberant celebration of poetic language. Yet at the same time, the enthusiasm of that writing is often stopped cold by a certain obstinacy of language – the linguistic equivalent of what he describes as the aesthetic experience of being "glad to the brink of fear" (*W*, I, 9). In Emerson's writing, the succession of images often gets out of hand in a frantic process of multiplication and reformulation. When the orator speaks "like a river" (*W*, II, 218) the series of images he uses conveys more of a disruption than a poetic succession or harmony. And maybe we find here another way of getting to grips with what Emerson calls "radical" correspondence: Language itself, in its fizzling, flaring series of images, presents a kind of phenomenal being that suggests an experience not unlike the idealist experience of nature or reality in which sublimation, the sublime experience and the emanation of spontaneous feeling lead to a dissolution of the

individual that is then recovered via the affirmation of the individual by a "Selbstbewußtwerdung als intelligibles Vernunft-Subjekt," as Harmut Boehme has argued (Böhme 1989). But, and this is why this correspondence is "radical" in Emerson, his vision of correspondence is not about a final relation in harmony. More strongly than Kant, Emerson insists on the irreducibility of this relation but suggest that it is precisely because language (art, poetry, aesthetic contemplation) and nature can never be brought up to a par that this relation remains relevant, "unsettles" and asks for its figuration. The relation then is precisely not mimetic, on the contrary, it presents its very own explosion into the phenomenal being of language. It itself is, as Emerson argues in "Eloquence," "power" (*W*, VIII, 115) or an "emanation" (*W*, VIII, 114) and the orator's "speech is not to be distinguished from action. It is the electricity of action" (*W*, VIII, 115). The implicit connection between reality and language, as suggested by Emerson's revision of Swedenborgian correspondence, is not that language can mime reality, but rather, that in its presentation of an event of meaning and figuration, in its production of fragments, of irreconcilable pictures, it itself is phenomenal being, material and real. Language, therefore, does not merely represent the disorder and eventfulness of a world, it *de facto* presents disorder and eventfulness as a succession of images and as a planned and unplanned integration and disintegration of metaphoric structures and analogies. Emerson style, the way in which it often presents a series of only loosely connected images, metaphors, symbols, etc., consequently presents a universe in linguistic fragments, like a collection of daguerreotypes documenting discrete and unconnected moments.

This vision of a world fragmented in its presentation in the text is by no means Emerson's particular philosophical and poetic crisis: Edgar Allen Poe, Emily Dickinson, and other early nineteenth-century writers have been puzzled by the kind of phenomenalist argument about perception – famously articulated by Hume in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hume 1999) –, stating that our perceptual faculties provide only fragmentary, discrete and discontinuous data of the world, and that we therefore can only know the world in bits and pieces. This crisis was widely discussed in America in the early eighteenth century. Emerson himself makes a reference to it that, in its intimation of an accelerated life of the senses, already anticipates the discussions about a specifically modern "nervousness" around 1900:

> "It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us." (*W*, III, 75-76)

In the writing of Emerson, of Dickinson, and also of Poe, this crisis of perception is very often transformed into a problem of symbolism. To these authors, single verbal elements represented self-sufficient and independent units that functioned almost like exaggerations of perceptual moments. These symbolist elements of language would render a world particularly graspable but, at the same time, the irreducibility of these individual moments would also invite a certain skepticism as to whether they could all be composed to actually depict a world. In fact, arguments about the fragmentary nature of the universe have often been associated, historically, with the philosophical problems of symbolism and representation. Traditional symbolism presupposes, a philosophy, or rather, a worldview, in which the material and its representation in language constitute both mirrors of yet another, ideal reality (from which they "emanated"). In Kenneth Burke's terminology, the symbol is "a *terministic* bridge whereby one realm is transcended by being viewed *in terms* of a realm beyond it" (Burke 1966: 5).[8] Symbolism consequently is an attempt to relate one thing to another, to establish a correspondence and, in Swedenborg, even transcendence. In Emerson's peculiar, 'inconsistent' mode of writing, the symbol is thus precisely introduced as a philosophical issue. It is meant to problematize the ways in which we perceive the world. In Emerson's poetological practice – as well as, say, in Dickinson's – symbols do not hold this promise of transcendence. In the progression of a text, they remain particular, "infinitely repellent particles" that cannot be integrated into the broader argument of the text.

Consequently, Emerson's take on symbolism is not so much a matter of building "bridges," but rather of drawing attention to the gaps between analogies, parallelisms, etc., of investigating some abyss at the heart of representation and reality. This is why there is a tendency for the metonymic rather than the symbolic in Emerson's writing. And it is exactly this being metonymical that underwrites a kind of "realism" in Emerson's writing: the metonymic, with its sudden shifts functions as an attempt at producing an eventfulness in language that will somehow remind us of the eventfulness of our world. But again, it can always only be a reminiscence, a "mistranslation". This is the paradox, hence, of the symbol: it asserts its individuality when it effectively gains its value from the "fluxional" process that grants the symbol's meaning in the first place:

> "Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead. Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one." (*W*, III, 34)

8 See also Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953: esp. 50).

As soon as the symbol becomes a self-sufficient unit, a "bridge" rather than a "ferry" or a "horse," it is inevitably also a dead fragment.

We may ask ourselves what this reduction of the world to fragments, what the disunity of the universe means to Emerson? Does he believe that, in the last instance, there is a set of overarching explanatory structures for the universe? Yes, I think he does, but these principles can only be phrased optatively and they are generated precisely out of the disunity, flux of the nature. Emerson is not a postmodernist, we find in his writing a strong echo of philosophical and theological thought where the perception of chaos and the world's disintegration will ultimately illuminate a different, harmonized structure of the universe. "By or beyond each thought frankly," Emerson argues in "Fate," "by harping, or, if you will, pounding on each string, we learn at last its power. By the same obedience to other thoughts we learn theirs, and then comes some reasonable hope of harmonizing them" (*W*, VI, 4). It is the achievement of Stanley Cavell to have shown that this hope, this optimism, in Emerson is always already coupled with a profound (if sometimes hidden) skepticism.[9] What used to be the prevalent understanding of Emerson, namely that he was great writer merely because of his personality and that the consistency of his American character somehow rescued him from the inconsistencies or even obvious faults of his writing, can be dismissed precisely if we accept that his symbolist procedures, as laid out above, are not a mere accident of his writing but, rather, their very 'programme'. This is why, for instance, *Nature*'s inconsistency is 'programmatic,' it functions as the introduction of a mode of writing, a kind of philosophical reasoning that cannot be addressed correctly without paying attention to the concrete linguistic forms and processes of figuration in which it is expressed. Its reinsertion of 'metaphoricity' into the highly structured discourse of typology functions itself as a philosophical critique or critique of philosophy since it presents itself, to use a phrase coined by Jacques Derrida, as "a flower of rhetoric without properties, with no proper meaning, a repeated self-quotation" (in Bloom 2004: 125), and thus challenges the totalizing tendency of philosophical discourse by an attention to the rhetoric or the poetic. And as we have seen earlier, this possibility of speaking differently, of speaking poetically, for Emerson is the condition of the possibility of new meaning, and, therefore, the promise that 'makes' America.

While for Emerson "the power of picture or expression [...]. implies ... a certain control over the spontaneous states, without which no production is possible" (*W*, II, 336), it is important to point out that he sees a dimension of rhetoricity or figuration at work in any individual occurrence of language or speech. Poetry or art are "a conversion of all nature into the rhetoric of thought" (*W*, II, 336). As a consequence, Emerson's poetics constantly manages to refute the totalizing gesture

9 Cavell has written at length about this combination of optimism with a profound scepticism in his "Thinking of Emerson" and "An Emerson Mood," both appended to his *The Senses of Walden* (1981: 123–38, 141–60).

usually associated with a poetological programme: Every reading, every conversation, every use of language is necessarily a translation, that is, it is lost in a kind of rhetorization that, to use a term that Emerson adopts from Schleiermacher, can only be an "approximation": "Every time we converse," Emerson argues, "we seek to translate it into speech, but whether we hit, or whether we miss, we have the fact. Every discourse is an approximate answer: but it is of small consequence, that we do not get it into verbs and nouns, whilst it abides for contemplation for ever" (W, III, 282).[10] As we have seen before, Emerson's method of composition further enhances approximative quality of his writing by offering a conflagration of styles so that its intention remains indecisive, vague.

Clearly enough, then, Emerson essays do not amount to a poetics, to a consistent voice, but rather show what it means, to use Paul de Man's description,

> „to start out from the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure [are] bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge." (De Man 1986: 23)

Emerson's essays refuse to totalize their own assertions exactly by the ways in which they bring terms, voiced styles, ambiguities, etc. into play, all used previously (in earlier essays, by other writers, etc.) but now placed into a new rhetoric constellation and thus acquiring a new meaning. The totalisation of a poetics is consequently refused by a consistent interest into how terms can be brought into play again, how they can be shown in a new light by placing them within a new poetic or rhetoric configuration. And clearly enough, this is a process that does not aim for a stable infrastructure for writing or the institutionalization of a poetics. Emerson's lifelong writing, his constant recycling and rewriting of passages from his journals as well as from earlier essays may, in the case of individual essays, seem to provide a particular conclusion that in its given, particular rhetorical context may be said, to use De Man's term, "irrefutable" (De Man 1986: 19). But if we compare particular uses of a concept, a phrase, a style etc. to other uses – in the essays, in the lectures, in the journals –, it becomes obvious that these divergent uses do not amount to a systematic presentation of the deeper laws and infrastructures that could be used to control and govern a next reading or analysis. As a result, one can identify two different uses of rhetorics in Emerson's essays: On the one hand, it administers a study of tropes – Emerson's tropology, his investigation of how the meaning of tropes changes according to their particular rhetorical context–, on the other, it provides a discourse of and on persuasion – that is, an examination of the power of affective or performative

10 On the influence of Schleiermacher's notion of "approximation" on early language and interpretation theory, see Joseph Margolis, "Schleichermacher and Theorists of Language and Interpretation" (1987).

language and how it produces a presence that will inevitably again be caught up by the rhetorical movement of tropes.

Furthermore, as I have argued before, Emerson's refusal to be systematic or programmatic also coincides with his particular thematic interests. Because the historical value of ordinary life has not yet been asserted, Emerson believes, it cannot be narrated in an authoritative account. The irreducible heterogeneity and fluidity of American life in the contemporary moment asks for an equally flexible poetic style, able to transform the "rapid intrinsic energy" (*W*, I, 122) of the present moment into a kind of writing that is itself eventful. This is why Emerson insists that "[t]he literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time" (*W*, I, 111). When Emerson asserts that he "ask[s] not for the great, the remote, the romantic" (*W*, I, 111) and instead pledges to focus on the "common," the "familiar," and the "low" (*W*, I, 111) then this also comes as a disengagement from the "programmatic" aspirations of a poetics and as a call for a kind of attention that is specific to literature or poetry. As he argues in "The American Scholar," American literature, because it yet lacks a long history or a canon of "classical" works, is in a privileged position to refocus literature's attention to the materialities of the contemporary moment: "That which had been negligently trodden under foot by those who were harnessing and provisioning themselves for long journeys into far countries, is suddenly found to be richer than all foreign parts" (*W*, I, 110-111). Even if Emerson in his journals excerpts the writing of two thousand years, he consistently replaces the vanishing points of Western culture – "Homer or Shakespeare" (*W*, I, 17) – by an attention to the heterogeneity of culture in the present moment:

> "Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria; the sunset and moonrise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams." (*W*, I, 17)

The resulting rhetorics in Emerson is one that attempts to be responsive to the flux of the present moment of culture and of nature, to the eventfulness of a present unfolding, emerging, or, as Emerson terms it, "becoming" (*W*, II, 45). But because the passage through this heterogeneous field of nature is incalculable, an American poetics must itself remain hazy and impermanent. It can itself only figure as a momentary expression of a momentary situation and cannot be instrumentalised or founded as a national literature or rhetorics. Because a literary history, a canon is absent, American literature and rhetorics must build up from nature, from the contemporary moment, where "the anchorage is quicksand" (*W*, III, 45). For Emerson, this situation is more generally the situation of American culture as a whole, as he points out in a late address ("Moral Forces: Read on a Fast Day

Appointed by the President of the United States, 13 April 1862"), mentioning the "groundless ground" upon which American culture necessarily needs to be built:

> "And see how we are planted with our antiquities, and everlasting laws of nature, and long immoveable conservatisms, and our old religions: We are all set-down on a spinning ball rushing with inconceivable velocity in a whirl of similar balls, that make the mind giddy to think of, – never a resting place, never a port – never so much as a pillow of air under us, but a hollow, immense gulf below and above our solidity is our foundation. Will you make your bed on a chain of lightning? Well, all this groundless ground and gay foundation wherefrom to build up, is the precise symbol of our whole position in the universe, our whole social and moral status. On such tottering basis of thoughts, of sentiments, of perceptions is our power and well-being built." (*LL*, II, 279-280)

"Cripples and monsters"

Speaking of the impermanence of America's poetic words and of the 'programmatic' inconsistency of Emerson's essays, we should also remember that contemporary commentators on America's art of public speech had always been baffled by the American orator's tendency towards rhetorical exuberance. One of the most decisive critiques is Alexis de Tocqueville's, who in Chapter XVIII of *Democracy in America* ("Why American Writers and Orators Are often Bombastic") reproaches American rhetoricians for their "unreasonably inflated" style and their "pomposity" (*DiA*, 561). Elsewhere, he criticizes Americans for their use of "so many improper terms and inadequate expressions" (*DiA*, 178), which he believes expresses the "violent and precipitous process" (*DiA*, 173) that prepared the founding of the American republic. He is especially disturbed by the power of American oratory to produce what he calls "monsters":

> "We have seen, moreover, that in democratic peoples the sources of poetry are beautiful but relatively rare. They are soon exhausted. Finding no more material for the ideal in what is real and true, poets give up on truth and reality altogether and create monsters. I have no fear that the poetry of democratic peoples will prove timid and quite mundane. I worry, rather, that it will constantly be losing itself in the clouds and end up depicting worlds that exist only in the imagination. I fear that the works of democratic poets will often be replete with immense and incoherent images, exaggerated portraits, and bizarre composites, and that the fantastic creatures that spring from such poets' minds may at times make one long for the real world." (*DiA*, 562)

Instinctively, Tocqueville connects the problem of American words to the lack of a "supreme authority" (*DiA*, 178) in America. He believes that the Americans' penchant for stylistic incoherence is not only due to the their immaturity with a veritable poetic style, rather, he thinks that it is a consequence of a lack of sources for real poetry. Lacking a definite shape and history, so Tocqueville implies, the American culture does not lend itself easily to literature or poetry. Consequently, when Tocqueville speaks of Americans' "democratic instincts" (*DiA*, 174), he does

so in a derogatory manner, suggesting that it is precisely the capricious form of democracy that is responsible also for the impermanence of American words. But what makes Tocqueville so anxious about the impermanence of words in America – namely that it cannot yet be controlled by an 'official' political discourse – in Emerson is precisely the linguistic nucleus that makes its democratic promise possible. For Emerson, as we have seen before, such an impermanence of words is the condition of the possibility of a different articulation of 'America' and, hence, the essence of America's democratic promise.

Tocqueville's observations do not only concern the nature of American public discourse. He also comments on American forms of writing or, rather, the non-existence of a veritable "American literature".[11] There is a passage in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* that has not received much attention, but it frames a problem that is relevant to our concerns here. Tocqueville here critically reports on the "poetic style" of Americans:

> "I have often noted that Americans, who generally conduct business in clear, incisive language devoid of all ornament and often vulgar in its extreme simplicity, are likely to go in for bombast when they attempt a poetic style. In speeches their pomposity is apparent from beginning to end, and, seeing how lavish they are with images at every turn, one might think they never said anything simply. [...] The reason for this can be stated without much difficulty. In democratic societies, each citizen is usually preoccupied with something quite insignificant: himself. If he lifts up his eyes, he sees only one immense image, that of society, or the even larger figure of the human race. He has either very particular and very clear ideas or very general and very vague notions; there is nothing in between. Once drawn out of himself, therefore, he invariably expects that someone is going to set before him some prodigious thing to behold. [...] This, I think, explains fairly well why men in democracies, whose affairs are generally so slight, ask their poets for works conceived on such a vast scale and portraits so extravagant in their proportions." (*DiA*, 561)

Other than in Tocqueville's worried account, Emerson sees the impermanence of "vulgar" words as a potential corrective against the tendency of political speech to sediment within authoritarian forms. To him, the promise of words in America is precisely not linked to an American adoption of traditional literary forms – "the great" or "the romantic" (*W*, I, 111) –, but rather, to its literature's openness to the vulgarity of "[t]he meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat" (*W*, I, 111). And Emerson insists that it is precisely such an attention to that which is vulgar or ordinary that will make the American epoch: "Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds" (*W*, I, 111), as he famously phrases it in *Nature*. And Emerson also confesses a penchant for what Tocqueville terms "vulgarities" when he notes, in his journal, that he wants to "shock" his readers by his improper "taunts and cries of hatred and

11 See also Cushing Strout's "Tocqueville and the Idea of an American Literature" (1986) for an account of Tocqueville's interest in America's literature.

anger" (*J*, V, 83). Here, the American disposition towards "uncouth words," to use Jefferson's phrase cited in Chapter Three, is an expression of America's flexible democratic promise. For Tocqueville, on the other hand, such a stylistic inaptitude is merely the expression of the Americans' lack of "a sure enough taste":

> "Writers, for their part, are hardly likely to resist these instincts, which they share. They are always pumping up their imaginations until they become so unreasonably inflated that they forsake the great for the gigantesque. They hope in this way to attract the immediate attention of the crowd and focus it on themselves, and in this they are often successful. For the crowd, which looks to poetry only for very vast subjects, lacks the time to take the precise measure of all that are laid before it and lacks as well a sure enough taste to discern readily in what respects those subjects are disproportionate. Author and public mutually corrupt each other." (*DiA*, 561-562)

The possibility of a "mutual corruption," in Tocqueville the source of a profound anxiety, in Emerson forms the basis of the linguistic freedom of America. Because the "disproportionate" domains of private and public speech in America continually inflect and corrupt each other, and because they never quite overlap, they safeguard American discourse from the danger of sedimentation. For Emerson, it is precisely rhetoric's power to produce "monsters," to be able to figure that which hitherto was unsayable in what may be "immense and incoherent imagery" and "exaggerated portraits," that is the strength of the American dialect. Because "losing itself in the clouds" (*DiA*, 562) is precisely the way in which this poetry taps into what has not yet become part of our ordinary language games. To be able to come up with "worlds that exist only in the imagination" (*DiA*, 562), for Emerson and other writers of the time precisely holds the promise of a language invented anew, and, thus, of defining or creating a different America.

In his essay on "Art," Emerson draws attention to this revolutionary potential of language: "Art is the need to create; but in its essence, immense and universal, it is impatient of working with lame or tied hands, and of making cripples and monsters, such as all pictures and statues are. Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end" (*W*, II, 363). Emerson recognizes that even if the "essence" and "end" of art is the "creation of man and nature," this creation must remain an ideal end that can only be approximated by language's implication in the poetic and rhetoric. These "cripples and monsters" consequently function as the simultaneously necessary and inevitable detour or defection of language from its ideal ends. But it is precisely when language is able to produce the worlds that only exist in the imagination that its ends become "immense and universal". Consequently, one could argue with Emerson that a dimension of rhetorical decorum is never merely a collateral nuisance. It is necessary if literary discourse is to achieve its "immense and universal" end, namely the production of a qualitatively different future. That literature or art are open to this dimension of decorum, that they are ready to receive such an incalculable rhetoricity, this, for Emerson, is how they safeguard themselves against the ossification of tradition.

In "Circles," Emerson takes this argument a step further by suggesting that works of art are also epoch-making: because art and literature give form to the fluidity and volatility of "nature," they can generate "new thought," that potentially builds a "new continent":

> "There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees. [...] The Greek sculpture is all melted away, as if it had been statues of ice; here and there a solitary figure or fragment remaining, as we see flecks and scraps of snow left in cold dells and mountain clefts, in June and July. [...] The Greek letters last a little longer, but are already passing under the same sentence, and tumbling into the inevitable pit which the creation of new thought opens for all that is old. The new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet; the new races fed out of the decomposition of the foregoing. New arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts made useless by hydraulics; fortifications, by gunpowder; roads and canals, by railways; sails, by steam; steam, by electricity." (*W*, II, 302)

But again, Emerson's does not envision the epochal turn as a smooth transition. Rather, resulting out of a confrontation with "incalculable" nature, it comes as a "shock or leap" (*W*, III, 179) that itself cannot be calculated. Emerson here conceives of this turn as a "destruction" that only leaves "figures" or "fragments" of what went before. In other words: American poetics, as a 'destructive poetics' (see also Chapter Three), figures as an excess of itself, its language continually overtaking the speech acts that bring it into being. There is then a curious form of self-engendering or "self-registration" that is the result of this excessive nature of America's thought and poetry: it is precisely because it has the power to be in excess of the narrative that it tells about itself, that it can be "above time" (*W*, II, 67), in a "radical correspondence" with the eventfulness of the present or nature into which it feeds itself back into.

As we will see in more detail in Chapter Five, Emerson's poetics of nature is also the vantage point from which he develops his theory of a democratic politics. In accordance to his belief in the "incalculability" of nature, he continues to insist that nature is not a "cause," but always a "novel effect" or an "emanation" whose law "no chemistry" and "no mechanics" (*W*, I, 199-200) can account for. While this prevents nature's quick integration or instrumentalisation as the origin of a political programme, Emerson is also careful to warn against an over-interpretation of nature. It would be wrong, he argues in "The Method of Nature," to assume that in nature "everything refers" (*W*, I, 200). As he explains:

> "Nature can only be conceived as existing to a universal and not to a particular end, to a universe of ends, and not to one, – a work of *ecstasy*, to be represented by a circular movement, as intention might be signified by a straight line of definite length." (*W*, I, 201)

If we were to instrumentalise nature as field of a political programmatics, then "the tools run away with the workmen" (*W*, I, 209) as Emerson phrases it. He insists that "a man's wisdom is to know that all ends are momentary, that the best end

must be superseded by a better" (*W*, I, 209). In parts, this refusal to instrumentalise a "method of nature" also explains his disengagement from social reform:

> "He who aims at progress, should aim at an infinite, not at a special benefit. The reforms whose fame now fill the land with Temperance, Anti-Slavery, Non-Resistance, No Government, Equal Labor, fair and generous as each appears, are poor bitter things when prosecuted for themselves as an end." (*W*, I, 214)

If the "method of nature" envisions a political goal, then it is only that "[y]our end should be one inapprehensible to the senses: then will it be a god always approached, – never touched" (*W*, I, 216). If the object that the political reformer sets before him is too specific, "he presently exhausts it" (*W*, I, 217).

Refusing to translate the "method of nature" into a political programme, Emerson maintains that it finds its application only in the unorganized multiplicity of experience in the present. The consequence for Emerson's theory of political reform is that it is not in a method but, rather, in the particularities of ordinary experience that we find the "germ" (W, XI, 143) for the advent of the epochal turn. As he argues in the lecture on "The Times":

> "[I]n the wild hope of a mountain boy, […] in the love-glance of a girl; in the hair-splitting conscientiousness of some eccentric person […] is to be found that which shall constitute the times to come, more than in the now organized and accredited oracles. For whatever is affirmative and now advancing, contains it." (*W*, I, 264)

The consequence of Emerson's poetics or "method" of nature is thus a literature that attests to language a certain spontaneity, contemporaneity, and eventfulness so that the event of the text goes beyond merely representing what it describes. But because it exceeds itself as a rhetorical structure, it itself becomes factitious, *welthaltig*. This characteristic spilling over of the text into the world, the self-referral and self-registration of Emerson's poetics, is also the point of departure from which I will develop the political implications of Emerson's poetics for 'America' in the next Chapter.

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound –
It beckons, and it baffles –
Philosophy – don't know –
And through a Riddle, at the last –
Sagacity, must go –
To guess it puzzles scholars;
To gain it, men have shown
Contempt of generations,
And crucifixion known.

– *Emily Dickinson*

Five

The Aporia of Passage and the Future of American Democracy

Starting in "Self-reliance," where he insists on the individual's capacity for contingency and argues against the totalizing assumptions of individualism, Emerson tries to envision an individual that strongly resembles Foucault's description of the modern individual as that which "resists all secret codes, who has no identity, who is not reducible to one or another of the hermeneutic techniques of pastoral power, who is marked by the 'right to be different'" (Foucault 1983: 211). This individual, Emerson argues, in its *epoché* of acquired ways of interpreting the world or in its complete suspension of the belief in the world before us, necessarily attracts the contempt of all those who want to assert the legacy of tradition and history: "The new statement is always hated by the old, and, to those dwelling in the old, comes like an abyss of skepticism" (*W*, II, 305). But it is precisely by way of a suspension of common sense and by way of a radical questioning of the world before us that the individual (the "genius," the "poet," the "representative man") in Emerson's writing entertains the promise or possibility of another world. And it is such a stepping out of the continuum of history and the subsequent acquisition of a different perspective on the world that also establishes a new, unprecedented meaning of the world. For Emerson, the potential of 'American' individualism is simultaneously always also the possibility of progress, that is, the possibility of the advent of a new era, age, or epoch.

Hans Blumenberg has shown that the epochal threshold is always a kind of impossible *Nullpunkt* at which, simultaneously, a system comes to its close while another begins. But the epochal threshold – as a moment without expansion – is impossible to explicate, Blumenberg argues, since the boundaries it declares become manifest only after it has been crossed. The epochal turn is thus a frontier that is imperceptible and in Blumenberg's account not necessarily tied to an event or a date (Blumenberg 1983: 469). Because the recognition of the epochal turn asks us to abandon old doctrines and initiate a new system of elementary presuppositions, because we cannot establish the logos of the transition, the epochal threshold necessarily remains an *aporia*, not just in the sense of an epistemological undecidability, but rather in the sense of a quandary that is lacking a "poros," a way, or a passage. Maybe it is useful to recall here that in Greek,

"poros" also denotes the dangerous or risky passage across the sea, and as I have argued in Chapter Three, it is precisely in such moments of a risky passage that Emerson sees the experience of 'America' both institutet and challenged.[1]

Jacques Maritain, in his *Reflections an America*, has argued for a continued significance of this passage for Americans and identified a paradox in the fact that Americans, in spite of having settled in the New World, are still not a settled people:

> "We are confronted in this country with a curious paradoxical contrast. Nobody seems less indifferent to the world and to the goods of this world, more eager to work on it, to transform it (not so much in order to enjoy it, but in order to make it better) than the American people. But at the same time one feels in them a kind of strange, insuperable detachment. Americans seem to be in their own land as pilgrims, prodded by a dream. They are always on the move – available for new tasks, prepared for the possible loss of what they have. They are not *settled, installed* (I would say in French, *"installés"* – a word which carries a strong moral connotation) though a trend toward an ideal of security has been developing since the war. Yet they are still far from being a *settled* people." (Maritain 1964: 93)

If we can identify the experience of passage (across the chaotic sea, across the epochal threshold, across the boundaries of old histories and doctrines, etc.) as an experience that is 'representatively' American, then this representativity is consequently not to be found in the ways in which it is (conventionally) expressed. Rather, it is precisely the suspension of conventional ways of narrating the passage and a deferral of the commonsensical meaning of this passage that is 'representative': the experience of 'America' can thus be expressed precisely as a constant delay and suspension of the meaning of a passage *to* 'America'.

The experience of 'America' thus comes to be synonymous with a prolonged experience of liminality as described in Victor Turner's classic anthropological study *On the Edge of the Bush*. As Turner argues: "[F]or me the essence of liminality is to be found in its release from normal constraints, making possible the deconstruction of the 'uninteresting' constructions of common sense [...] into cultural units which may then be reconstructed in novel ways." For Turner, liminality is thus exactly the "domain [...] of 'uncommon sense'" (Turner 1985: 159-60), and, as we have seen in previous chapters, Emerson locates the 'American' promise in a similar potential openness to such an 'uncommon sense': America for him is all about continually breaking down the linguistic and ideological boundaries established by common sense, by the doctrine of an equivalence of words and things, or by Adamic language theory, etc.

In Emerson, this need to be "unsettled" (*W*, II, 320) is meant both literally as well as figuratively, although it is commonly expressed in linguistic or poetic terms. And this "unsettling" is also the very challenge that Emerson's essays in their

1 For an extensive account of the epistemology of "aporia," see Sarah Kofman's "Beyond Aporia?" (1988).

focus on processes of poetic revision and refiguration both envision as well as respond to. One could argue that Emerson insists on the continuing significance of a specifically American experience of passage, but he does not conceive of it as a part of a teleology of manifest destiny in order to suggest that history is always in the making, that we need to interact "poetically" with our present in order to be aware of the choices it presents us with. What is at stake then, in the "unsettling" moment of the present, is the vanishing moment of the epochal turn or *Kehre* as a moment of decision that would establish the (temporal, cultural, ideological) boundaries of the next epoch.

In the American context and, especially, for what Sacvan Bercovitch has called "the symbolic construction of America" (Bercovitch 1993), the recognition of such an epochal turn is of vital importance. After all, the foundation of 'America' and the existence of a culture specifically 'American' hinges precisely on the identification of America's "crossing" or "leaping" from European culture, as Stanley Cavell has argued in *The Senses of Walden* (Cavell 1992: 136). As a result, American literature has been obsessed with the vanishing moments of such an epochal turn, with the moments of a passage away from the old and into a world that is brilliantly new. Emerson, as I have pointed out before, recognizes the radical or risky potential that such an epochal turn presents. He conceives of it as a moment of *aporia* not easily decidable but alerting us to the decisions we have made and letting us rethink the roads not taken.

For many of Emerson's contemporaries, the historiographical conundrum of America's epochal turn remained a preoccupation that pertained simply to the nation's political or socio-economic improvement. Emerson, however, turns the historiographical problem of the epochal threshold into a more general argument about the cognition or perception of the world. For my purposes here, the vanishing moment of the epochal turn and the kind of *epochē* it brings about, may serve to loosen the profound hold on our thought by common sense and by our ordinary ways of being. In other words, the epochal threshold brings about a moment in which old fundaments are precariously suspended and America is thrown into the vacuum of an unknown future that may be both a brilliant promise of manifest destiny as well as the abyss of a *horror vacuui*, of a vacated world in which my perceptions and beliefs do not account for anything anymore. It thus opens a minimal and precarious space for a new form of politics, of justice or responsibility, but at the same time, it speaks of the dangers of a certain scepticism,

as it may radically suspend our ordinary perception of the world.[2] In fact, the radical possibility of a world vacated of common sense, is tantamount to the potential arrival of a new form of politics, of justice, of responsibility, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out (Derrida 1992).

Emerson mentions several instances of such a suspension of judgment and how it may give way to a new way of thinking the world. In his essays, the very phenomenon of genius is repeatedly connected to precisely such a suspension of our ordinary ways of perceiving the world. Because the new world that the genius brings about always implies a rejection of common sense, the genius, radically refiguring the world in an unprecedented idiom, is bound to be misunderstood:

> "With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Out upon your guarded lips! Sew them up with pack-thread, do! else, if you would be a man, speak what you think to-day in words as hard as cannon-balls, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day. Ah, then, exclaim the aged ladies, you shall be sure to be misunderstood! Misunderstood! It is a right fool's words. Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood." (*W*, II, 391)

Emerson thus fuses the historiographical problem of a present moment continually adjourned with a problem of its expression or representation: We cannot give a comprehensive account of the present, but it is only by writing about it that we can unearth its potential to offer a qualitatively different future. The radical contingency and thus the irreducible historicity of thought and writing, in the present cannot be avoided: but it is only by speaking today what we think today that we can we can bring about the transition to the future. In Emerson, this transition is never described in terms of a millennialism, because it can itself not be anticipated. It can only be phrased tentatively: "[T]he time will come when we too [...] shall eagerly convert more than we now possess into means and powers" (W, I, 256). The very terms of the "conversion" that Emerson imagines, rest in its incalculability: it cannot and must not be predetermined. And like in Nietzsche, to confront the contradicting and radically irreducible possibilities of the present, also means to confront another temporality "above time" (*W*, II, 67), signifies a stepping out of historical time into a moment that has yet to be integrated into the historical continuum. Again, we can grasp here the full meaning of what I want to

2 On the legacy of such a skepticism in American culture, see Cavell's *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990), his comments in *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (1995), and the Chapter "The Philosopher in American Life (Toward Thoreau and Emerson)" in *Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1988). On Cavell's interest in skepticism, see also Michael Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (1989) and Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell skepticism, subjectivity, and the ordinary* (2002). For a comprehensive study of Emersonian skepticism, see John Michael's *Emerson and Skepticism* (1988).

call America's *epoché*: the determination of America's epoch, its place in history, literally hinges on a pause, on the opening of a "cleft", to use a term that Emerson adopts from Carlyle (*CEC*, 459), by means of which the American writer steps out of preconceived notions of 'America' and engages, self-reflexively, in a process of revision and refiguration. This stepping out of common sense cultural denominations will then have established, always already, a radically different meaning of 'America'.[3]

The *Kehre* or "conversion" that Emerson envisions implies a risk: its "results [...] are uncalculated and uncalculable" (*W*, III, 69), as Emerson remarks in "Experience". Like in Nietzsche, who similarly turns historicist thought against itself, to acquire or generate new meaning out of old terms potentially means to encounter madness. Emerson is aware of this risk implied by putting one's horizon of understanding at disposal:

> "A certain tendency to insanity has always attended the opening of the religious sense in men, as if they had been 'blasted with excess of light.' The trances of Socrates, the 'union' of Plotinus, the vision of Porphyry, the conversion of Paul, the aurora of Behmen, the convulsions of George Fox and his Quakers, the illumination of Swedenborg, are of this kind" (*W*, II, 281f.).

Emerson elaborates the notion of conversion in religious terms here, but we have already established that the religious in Emerson is, more often than not, a more general instance of the human and the symbol of something that is already deeply invested in the problems of hermeneutics. But I want to draw attention here to Emerson's reference to Thomas Gray's *Progress of Poesy*: "'blasted with excess of light'" (Gray 1862: 35, l.101) precisely denotes the way in which our acquiring of new meaning can be something risky and dangerous, potentially even traumatic in the sense that it can reconfigure our habitual perception of the world.[4] Emerson's poetics here paradoxically holds both a threat as well as a promise: a threat, because it implies the hazard of a world vacated of meaning ("insanity"), a promise, because it turns something that is yet unformed into figures and meaning. Just how strong this promise is, Emerson suggests in the concluding sentences of the Chapter on "Culture" in *The Conduct of* Life: "The time will come when the evil forms we have known can no more be organized," Emerson argues, but it is the poet who will "overcome and convert" this "chaos and gehenna. [The poet] will convert the Furies into Muses" (*W*, VI, 166).

There are other passages in Emerson's essays that suggest how he reconceives of the notion of (religious) conversion in poetic terms. For example in "Poetry and Imagination" where he argues that "[t]he [...] measure of poetic genius is the power [...] to convert those [superstitions] of the nineteenth century and of the

3 On America's special inclination towards the temporality of an "always already," see Jacques Derrida's *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2005: esp. 14)

4 Gray's reference itself is to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, III, 380.

existing nations into universal symbols" (*W*, VIII, 34). Or in *Natural History of the Intellect*, where he locates in poetry's power of figuration the power to transform the unformed experience of the "to-day" into a more general significance:

> "The highest measure of poetic power is such insight and faculty to fuse the circumstances of to-day as shall make transparent the whole web of circumstance and opinion in which the man finds himself, so that he [...] sees so truly the omnipresence of eternal cause that he can convert the daily and hourly event of New York, of Boston, into universal symbols." (*W*, XII, 42)

However, it is important to remember here that the conversion of the unformed material of "to-day" into poetic significance is not a process that can be calculated or pre-contained. The poetic principle of converting the particular into the universal has no law. Lacking a *telos*, this transition therefore is not easily answerable in the words of tradition, but only in poetry's turning of tropes, that is, in the incalculable mode of a rhetorical performance or *Vollzug*. The figure of the poet and that of the genius in Emerson represent this principle of a sustained commitment to the *Eigensinn* of language. The suspension of America's traditions consequently always has to be complemented with a more radical suspension or *epoché*: namely that of an "unsettling" of the naming of 'America' itself. And "unsettling," as we have already seen in Chapter Three, is not just a casual use of words, it implies a strategy that shakes up the sedimented forms of culture just as it suspends even America's most persistent cultural myth, namely that it is a country that was settled by pioneers.

When Emerson asks "Where do we find ourselves?" in the opening passage of "Experience," then this is to be read precisely as the instigation of a movement of self-implication that is meant to suspend the normalized, conventionalized meanings of 'America' and its underlying ideological tenets of providence, individualism, etc. These, not only for Emerson, had become empty ciphers. And Emerson's question, as he insists, cannot be answered simply by recourse to tradition or history. Those referring to the established authority of American scripture (Unitarian dogma, New England Typology, etc.), will precisely *not* be able to answer his question, because it refuses to be answered in the old terminology, as he points out in "The Over-Soul": "They do not answer the questions which the understanding asks. The soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after" (*W*, II, 282). Emerson implies again that in order to answer the question, we need to necessarily confront the inevitable self-referentiality of understanding. We need to engage in a process of self-implication or "criticism," and this process will itself be the answer. In other words: The confrontation with the contingent potential of the present moment ("Where do we find ourselves?") refuses to be expressed in the words of tradition or as a genealogical narrative. Rather, it must be answered by way of a radical sublation of acquired meanings and by their poetic refiguration: "People wish to be settled;

only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them" (*W*, II, 320). And this unsettling of prior designations is precisely how the hope for a better future, democracy, 'America,' etc., is entertained.

While this feature of self-referentiality is central to Emerson's rethinking of a culture of American individualism (in the sense of what Stanley Cavell has described as Emerson's discipline of "moral perfectionism"), it is, more generally, also a feature of America's *modernity*, of the "groundless ground" (*LL*, II, 280) on which it is founded. And it is precisely, Emerson argues, because of this "groundlessness" of understanding in America that we cannot predict its future:

> "No inspired man ever asks this question or condescends to these evidences. For the soul is true to itself, and the man in whom it is shed abroad cannot wander from the present, which is infinite, to a future which would be finite. These questions which we lust to ask about the future are a confession of sin. God has no answer for them. No answer in words can reply to a question of things. It is not in an arbitrary 'decree of God,' but in the nature of man, that a veil shuts down on the facts of to-morrow; for the soul will not have us read any other cipher than that of cause and effect. By this veil which curtains events it instructs the children of men to live in to-day. The only mode of obtaining an answer to these questions of the senses is to forego all low curiosity, and, accepting the tide of being which floats us into the secret of nature, work and live, work and live, and all unawares the advancing soul has built and forged for itself a new condition, and the question and the answer are one." (*W*, II, 284-85)

Because understanding must necessarily follow a certain logic – that of "cause and effect," for example –, it cannot answer "a question of things," that is, it cannot represent the contingency of our ordinary lifes and, thus, it cannot calculate our futures. There is an impenetrable "veil," however thin, that hinders our 'unmediated vista' on the "facts of tomorrow". These necessarily remain unintelligible in language. This is why Emerson's argument stresses the importance of an *acknowledgement* of the ordinary and the present moment as well as of an abandonment to its "tide of being": We must precisely resist an attempt to predetermine our future if we want it to be qualitatively different from what we are now. And this future happens, is "forged" as a "new condition," precisely if we abstain from anticipating it as a programmatic (political, systematic, philosophical) aim or intention. Emerson, in his radical reduction of the problem of understanding ('America,' the future, etc.), thus finds himself in a curious hermeneutic circle ("the question and the answer are one") that is strongly reminiscent of Heidegger's *hermeneutics of facticity* in which the act of understanding is itself part of *Da-Sein*, in which *Da-Sein* is nothing but the *Selbstauslegung* of *Dasein* (see *GA* 63, esp. 9-16).

And again, Emerson's notion of the "groundless ground" here exposes, *avant la lettre,* a problem that will later be described by Nietzsche as the characteristic "Grundlosigkeit" (*KAS*, III, 106) of philosophy or, by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit,* as the necessary and unavoidable "Bodenlosigkeit" (*GA*, V, 8) of his own and philosophy's undertaking. Emerson's question ("Where do we find ourselves?")

does consequently not lead to a representative formulation of our contemporary experience. Also, it does also not provide an answer that would reconcile the present moment with past and future history. Rather, the question initiates a hermeneutic maneuver that precisely resists the accumulation of the present moment into a series of (historical) moments and accentuates the eccentricity of the present moment with regards to history. This procedure of directing our understanding to or against what we are today induces, as Emerson argues in a passage in Experience, a certain bewilderment:

> "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight." (*W*, III, 45)

Emerson phrases this conundrum of the present moment's eccentricity with regards to historical time in similar terms in "Over-Soul," where he states that

> "man will come to see that the world is the perennial miracle which the soul worketh, and be less astonished at particular wonders; he will learn that there is no profane history; that all history is sacred; that the universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time" (*W*, II, 297).

The repetition of "will" here alerts us to the fact that the attainment of meaning (of the "sacred" history, of the "atom" or the "moment" with regards to the "universe") is characteristically deferred, just as the "stairs above us" necessarily "go upward and out of sight".

These examples suggest that the characteristic figure of Emerson's writing or poetics is how it imagines a 'coming back to itself,' a "reflection," "inversion," "criticism," or "conversion". Emerson is interested in such a figure of self-referral because it comes as a mode of poetic discourse that allows for an examination of the boundaries of our ways of making meaning. And he insists that Americans, as a liminal people, need to be especially open to such a poetic refiguration of what they are, if they want to live up to the promise named by 'America'. Victor Turner has drawn attention to a similar figure of self-referral when he has argued, in his classic treatise of liminality in *On the Edge of the Bush*, that it is by going near or beyond the boundaries of meaning that "a community of human beings may bend existentially back upon itself and survey its extant condition not solely in cognitive terms but also by means of tropes, metaphors, metonyms, and symbolic configurations [...]" (Turner 1985: 124). Similarly, the feasibility of 'America' as a community of liminars has to be reaffirmed constantly by way of such a poetic turning of the "tropes" and "symbolic configurations" that have brought about 'America' in the first place: "This human mind wrote history, and this must read it. The Sphinx must solve her own riddle" (*W*, II, 4), Emerson states in "History" and phrases precisely the way in which we cannot escape our own ways of making meaning. Emerson's writing accepts this "double bind". It knows that this

hermeneutic circle is not dissolved by an attempt to establish a transcendental system of meanings or a more 'representative' account of our world, rather, it wants to precisely invest in this circle in order to enable its next turn, troping, etc.

But this turn or *Kehre*, if we conceive of it in epochal terms, as Emerson often does, also comes as a risky sublation of prior meanings. The kind of *epoché* that I am interested here thus creates a "cleft" or a "verge," at times even an "abyss," to use Emerson's terms, in which our habitual ways of making meaning are challenged from its margins or even, *in extremis*, from *without* the conventions they delimit. Emerson therefore locates the "measure of poetic power" (*W*, 12, 42) precisely in its ability to bracket the present world by way of a suspension of conventions and traditions. This suspension is brought about by a *refiguration*, that is, by a 'poetic' and, thus, incalculable turning of the tropes, that will itself result in a new account of the world not pre-contained in present discourses. This poetic bracketing of the world, as an interruption of our normalized ways of seeing it or giving account of it, corresponds to what Jean-François Lyotard has described, in *The Differend*, as the ethic possibility of the coming of the other, of *l'invention de l'autre*. And the situation of the American present – the way in which it presents itself as a hermeneutic conundrum, indicating a future that cannot be named – must be understood as what Lyotard calls the *differend*, that "unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be" (Lyotard 1988: 13). In Lyotard, and I would argue that Emerson makes a similar point, this "unstable [...] instant of language" is the promise of freedom and justice because it holds the promise of a *different* politics continually changed by its exposure to a potential in language. Emerson in his essays radically challenges contemporary definitions of freedom and redefines it as that which is irreducible to our historical framings and narratives. He thus envisions, to use Jacques Derrida's phrase in *The Other Heading*, an "entitlement to a word" that is otherwise and *other* than the present. Derrida argues that this freedom stems from a posture that insists on "not to be identical to itself. Not to not have an identity, but not to be able to identify itself, to be able to say "I" or "we"; to be able to take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself or, if you prefer, only in the difference with itself (avec soi)" (Derrida 1992: 9).

America's *epoché*, its critical turning upon itself as well as the beginning of its age of criticism – America's "age of reflection" (*W*, II, 327) as Emerson calls it in his lecture on "Intellect" – consequently speaks of America's discovery of its inevitable self-implication or *Selbstverhältnis*. And Emerson's redirection of focus to the present or the ordinary happens precisely in order for this self-reflexivity to occur. The discovery of this self-implication is tantamount, as Emerson argues, to America's coming "out of darkness [...] into the light of today (*W*, II, 327). The present thus for Emerson is the medium in which both our relation to the world as well as our reflection upon it undergo a complex process of criticism. And the

question "Where do we find ourselves?" is at once Emerson's most basic as well as most sophisticated expression of this critical self-implication. The advent of America's age is thus precisely not signalled by the achievement of the nation's promise but, rather, by a becoming critical or self-reflexive. Again then, if I stress here Emerson's attention to the moment of the present, then this is not meant to locate this present as the new origin of American culture. Rather, it is meant to suggest that Emerson's present necessarily remains eccentric towards itself because in giving account of it, we must refigure it. Emerson's question, instead of providing a point of origin for future and more authoritative articulations of 'America,' thus points us to an originary complication, an origin that is already double, because it is always already related to itself. And it is precisely in this sense that Emerson's vision of the foundation of a specifically 'American' culture is indeed radical and unprecedented: it sees 'America's' cultural subjectivity, its 'identity' in a critical process of rhetorics rather than in the individual destinies of the subjects that found this culture. If we consider contemporary attempts of confirming America's identity via the re-establishment of a genealogy of founding fathers, we may begin to understand how radical Emerson's vision was at the time.

Democracy's *ouverture*

In the following, I will establish a connection between Emerson's obsession with the eccentric temporality of the present with Jacques Derrida's elaboration of a notion of "politics" or "democracy". Although the terminology of the present (presentation, presence, etc.) has become off-limits and is now a forbidden language in cultural studies, it has been overlooked that Jacques Derrida's *turn* to politics is nothing but a re-evaluation of the temporality of such an eccentric present. Not the present as presence, as something that is present to itself, but as the moment in which politics is oriented towards the future, that is, the moment of *Entscheidung* and *Ereignis*. Derrida is not the 'philosopher of the future' – clearly he knew Nietzsche well enough to avoid some of the more sinister implications of this label – and I do not think that he is the 'philosopher of the messianic,' as current critical language has it – even tough he has of course been deeply influenced by a Judaic tradition of thought. Derrida, as I will show, is well aware that an 'ethics of the future' is a dangerous kind of transcendentalism if it is not connected to the contingencies of a (lived and experienced) present. Derrida's writing, especially that after his political *Kehre*, comes predominantly as a criticism of philosophy's metaphysical implications, but it also imagines forms of a participation in the present – that, for Derrida, are potentially, forms of justice or freedom.

For Derrida, if this present is to potentially open up a different future, it precisely needs to lack a horizon of expectation. In other words: It cannot have a telos or teleology, it must come as an opening, as an unconditioned and unconditional beginning: "History depends on such an excessive beginning [*ouverture*]" (Derrida and Wills 1995: 6). Derrida argues that in the moment "of waiting without horizon of expectation" (Derrida 1994: 168), potentially the advent of something different or new can happen. This moment thus cannot be inscribed within the calendars of a nation, and, in our context, it cannot be textually produced in a constative statement such as the Declaration of Independence. The attempt to lock the performative statement into a programme, as Derrida insists, "is quite simply to erect a barricade against the future" (Derrida 1983: 19). Confronting this moment of decision in an ambivalent present therefore means to "always risk the worst" (Derrida, Porter, and Morris 1983: 19).

It is important to insist here that this is not a moral or ethical reductionism or the lack of a more concrete political project: the moment of decision will be, there is no doubt about that in Derrida's writing, violent and "monstrous" (Derrida 2005: 144). For Derrida, the moment of decision – although its cancellation of ambivalences is never free of judgment and never without violence – is already ethical. The opening up of justice, the political system, etc. is in itself already the direction of a new and more 'just' justice or political system. And it is precisely in this excess of meaning, in the precipitancy or excessivity that is realized by the decision that Derrida finds the promise of justice or democracy (see Derrida 1992). The only (but indeed radical) assumption of Derrida's politics is thus that in every moment of decision, there is a "kind of essential disproportion that must inscribe excess and inadequation in itself" (Derrida 1992: 248). This disproportion itself raises the stakes in the demand for justice" (Derrida 1992: 248), that is, the inscription of an excess in the moment of the decision guarantees that the decision itself cannot be instrumentalised, cannot be calculated and therefore will have to be taken time and time again.

I want to understand what I have described as *epoché* in terms of a similar irreducible excessivity, a procedure that makes ordinary meaning go beyond itself, leading to a 'de-totalization' of the hold of ordinary language and common sense. It is by way of a refiguration, recirculation, and remobilization of the terms of common diction in "poetry" – Emerson's term for all kinds of literary writing – that this excessive meaning is produced. While the "demand for justice" in Derrida's philosophy is always bound up with language's potential for *difference* – its potential to always provide another meaning –, deconstruction's movement is one of constant "deferral," "delay," or "postponement" as well as simultaneous

"urgency," or "imminence" (Derrida 1994: 31)[5]: It urgently wants to bring about the new meaning while knowing at the same time, that it has not yet arrived.

As we have already seen in Chapter One, this is precisely the way in which Emerson conceives of the moment of the present as comprising different temporalities or temporal movements: On the one hand, the "American" present makes us aware that we are always and inevitably *too late* – "It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago" (*W*, I, 105) – yet also always *too early* – "I read with some joy of the auspicious signs of the coming days, as they glimmer already through poetry and art, through philosophy and science" (*W*, I, 110). There is, then, in Emerson an elaboration of a kind of Derridean originary posteriority (simultaneous urgency and deferment) that is the very sign of his politics: it voices the unconditioned or unconditional desire for change and another politics while it knows about our inescapable debt to and involvement in the past. Emerson's "embrace of the common" (*W*, I, 111), the way in which his writing focuses on the "matter" of our ordinary lives – "The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body" (*W*, I, 111) – directs our attention precisely to the way in which the present moment of American culture is at stake, is about to be decided, that is, become history. And thus, even if or precisely because it does not put forward a political agenda, it lays out a politics. As Derrida points out: "There is an avenir for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth" (Derrida 1992: 27).

Emerson's repeated criticism of the notion of "calculation" shows that he was intimately aware that America's future was not a matter of a political programmatics or one of simple calculation. Living in a time that saw the rapid evolution of the means of "statistics" and its implementation in all branches of society and government, he forcefully suggests that we cannot calculate our progress. Decisions (and with them a qualitatively different future) can only happen in a moment of "precipitate urgency," of "thoughtlessness and unconsciousness" (Derrida 1992: 26). In order to occur, they must be "made outside of knowledge or given norms" (Derrida 1994: 355). Only if our present is at stake – only if we are willing to again confront a kind of Nietzschean moment of madness in which the hold of our common diction is potentially lost – will there be an opening out

5 See also the following passage in *Specters of Marx*: "[D]iffer*a*nce, if it remains irreducible, irreducibly required by the spacing of any promise and by the future-to-come that comes to open it, does not mean only deferral, lateness, delay, postponement. In the incoercible differ*a*nce the here-now unfurls. Without lateness, without delay, but without presence, it is the preciptiation of an absolut singularity, … binding itself necessarily to the form of the instant, in imminence and in urgency: even if it moves toward what remains to come there is the pledge … The pledge is given here and now, even before, perhaps, a decision confirms it. It thus responds without delay to the demand of justice. The latter by definition is impatient, uncompromising, and unconditional" (Derrida 1994: 31).

of which history might proceed otherwise (as 'democracy,' as 'America,' etc.). It is precisely the unsorted disorder of the present – what Emerson calls its "mountainous miscellany" (*W*, VI, 289) – that holds the promise of more than one plausible course of history. Our inability to give a representative account of our present moment, the dichotomy of what we know (about ourselves) and what we do (to ourselves?) then, as in Derrida's account, "will be the condition of practical freedom" (Derrida 1994: 355). And, as Derrida argues, it is the "non-contemporaneity of present time with itself" (Derrida 1994: 25) that is then designated as the condition of the possibility of the event, and, with that, as the condition of the possibility of freedom and justice.

Therefore, the notions of a *democracy a-venir* (Derrida 1994; 1992: esp. 76-78) and that of a *justice a-venir* (Derrida 1992: 256-257) are associated with the structure of difference itself. This association of *différance* and a certain notion of democracy has been a persistent theme in Derrida's late work (see Derrida 1994: 64-65), and Derrida, in his explication of the "structure of the promise" of democracy (Derrida 1992: 78), repeatedly points out that this promise necessarily needs to be postponed, that this promise is never to be fulfilled, i.e. never to be turned into a utopian, messianic fulfilment. Otherwise it would be presence, and therefore, no longer a claim or an opening in historical time. Obviously its slow congealment into forms of private and public life cannot be prevented, and the unconditioned promise of one generation will always revert into or concretize into the life-world of the next – characteristically shaped by *ennui*, boredom, and nostalgia. The promise of one generation then is the unmarked, everyday life-world of the next. This is why the present has to be searched for its ambivalences, the way in which it contradicts itself, the ways in which its ideals are not in accord with the condition of its people. Democracy and differance consequently coincide in the "cleft" or "verge" (Emerson's terms) implied by the different temporalities of the contemporary moment. This opening differentiates the present from itself and presents us with a decision, that is, with the minimal space of another politics.

Even if Emerson consequently talks of the future, the future is at stake only insofar as the present is at stake, i.e. awaiting a decision or in the process of performing the decision. Simon Critchley has stressed that the mode of difference combines both postponement and urgency (the very signature of Emerson's political stance, as we have already seen in Chapter One). In his essay "The Other's Decision in Me," Critchley argues that Derrida's concept of politics is only plausible if we manage to think the *here and now* of its claim without taking it to be realized yet:

> "It is a question here of linking *la démocratie à venir* to différance understood [...] as *l'ici maintenant sans présence*, as an experience of the impossible without which justice would be meaningless. In this sense, la démocratie à venir does not mean that tomorrow (and tomorrow and tomorrow) democracy will be realized, but rather that the experience of justice as the maintaining-now of the relation to an absolute singularity is

> the à venir of democracy, the temporality of democracy is advent, it is arrival happening now. […] [D]emocracy is the future of deconstruction, but this future is happening now."(Critchley 1999: 154)

Critchley furthermore states – I think correctly – that Derrida's conception of a *democracy to come* is reminiscent of Benjamin's conception of the messianic as it blasts through the continuum of the present (Critchley 1999: 154), establishing the present's difference with itself (*ici maitenant sans presence*). Derrida's concept of a "messianism without content, of the "messianic without messianism" (Derrida 1994: 65), that is: of a messianism that is willing to give up its central norm or pledge (that salvation will happen in the future) in order to mobilize a (political, ethical, etc.) potential for self-differentiation in the *here and now*. For Derrida, it is precisely this self-differentiation bound back into our lived present that forms the promise of an emancipation that is not already pre-contained in ethical norms. This is why his messianism needs to be one without a messiah and why his invocation of Marxism in *The Specters of Marx* is less concerned with the ethical norms put forward by it but rather with the structure and form of the utterance or invocation in Marx's writing (see Derrida 1994: 162-176). Again then, we encounter here the attempt to think the potential of a *Jetzt*, that is, the potential of a present moment to bring about contingent historical responses. In Emerson, this is connected to a questioning of our particular circumstances and our relation to them in language. Consequently, the procedures of his writings point to a more radical hermeneutics that does not want to discover some lost meaning of 'America,' but rather conceives of 'America' as nothing else than the continual departure from itself, a process of self-differentiation put in motion by the kind of self-implication indicated by Emerson's question "Where do we find ourselves?" America, because of this self-differentiation, is a social body that always stands beside itself, or, as Joseph Vogl has phrased it, it is "stets verschoben, aufgehoben und vertagt […]. Die Heterogenität der sich selbst stiftenden Gemeinschaft verlangt, dass sie ihre Gründung stets ein weiteres Mal wiederholt, sie wird demokratisch nur im fortwährenden Rekurs auf ihre innere Kluft."[6] 'America,' then, is this sideways shift, the continual slipperiness of its foundations. And we have seen how this *Kluft* or "verge" never fails to attract Emerson's attention. He in fact makes a point that is very similar to Vogl's when he argues that it is precisely the American desire to define the specificity of its culture and history that produces what Emerson calls – in Heideggerian diction *avant la lettre* – the "unhandsome part of our condition," the unavailability of the meaning of 'America':

> "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and

6 Joseph Vogl, "Einleitung," in *Gemeinschaften. Positionen zu einer Philosophie des Politischen* (Vogl 1994: 20)

> playmates. We may have the sphere for our cricket-ball, but not a berry for our philosophy." (*W*, III, 49)

The hermeneutic impulse in Emerson consequently questions the nature of our experience in a kind of radical perspectivism in which the arrival of the full significance of 'America' is continually deferred. It shows that our experiences connect only as in "a string of beads" and that the moments of our lifes "prove to be many-coloured lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus" (*W*, III, 50). But it is precisely by virtue of being contingent with regards to our assessment of the world, by virtue of never quite being in harmony with the world, that these experiences also function as the seeds of change. Faced with the paralysis of American culture in Jacksonian democracy, Emerson locates in our contingent, momentary experiences the "force" or "chance" of risking what we are. His writing therefore references something like a coming together of deconstruction and hermeneutics in a "more radical hermeneutics," to use a term coined by John D. Caputo (Caputo 2000). Hans Georg Gadamer has argued that hermeneutics requires us to put our own horizon of understanding "into play" (*ins Spiel bringen*) and thereby putting it "at risk" (*aufs Spiel setzen*) (Gadamer 1960: 366). But while for Gadamer's hermeneutics the aim is always to appropriate another (or the other's) horizon as one's own (in the sense of an *Aneignung*) in what his hermeneutics conceives of as a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*), deconstruction has shown that to 'risk' this risk (of approaching the other's horizon of understanding, or, more generally, of what deconstruction calls the coming of the other) implies to put one's own meaning and self at risk, to put one's own home at risk. Again, Emerson of course uses very different terminology, but the gist of his argument in the essays is similar. Here, the final *Horizontverschmelzung* – the attainment of America's providential place in history, or, quite simply, the attainment of the meaning of America – cannot take place: because there can be no (complete) re-actualisation of the texts of tradition as there is no stable meaning to the founding texts in the first place; because America's historical moment is irreducible; and, last but not least, because the moment of experience and, especially, of reading and writing in Emerson is irreversible and cannot be brought into coordination with our ordinary experience of temporality. Another passage from "Experience" may illustrate that for Emerson the undertaking of putting one's horizon of understanding into play implies a risk that is very real indeed:

> "I had fancied that the value of life lay in its inscrutable possibilities; in the fact that I never know, in addressing myself to a new individual, what may befall me. I carry the keys of my castle in my hand, ready to throw them at the feet of my lord, whenever and in what disguise soever he shall appear. I know he is in the neighborhood, hidden among vagabonds. Shall I preclude my future by taking a high seat and kindly adapting my conversation to the shape of heads? When I come to that, the doctors shall buy me for a cent." (*W*, III, 53f.)

On the one hand, "unsettling", that radical questioning of our horizon(s) of understanding, Emerson says, has the power to put our homes in jeopardy so that "I never know [...] what may befall me." On the other, it is only by taking this risk that we can guarantee the coming of the other (the "new individual"), the advent of a different future. This conundrum for Emerson is never a simple or easily manageable one, certainly not among the misery depicted in "Experience." It confronts us with an existential decision of which we cannot know the outcome. "Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us: Pero si muove" (*W*, III, 55). The "quicksand" of "Experience" implies that to put our horizon of understanding at risk can also mean that we lose what we thought was a 'representative' experience as well as a 'representative' depiction thereof. The common is no longer simply the stable ground from which we can start to answer the question "Where do we find ourselves?" This ordinariness has itself become uncanny, to use Cavell's phrase, by way of our self-implication and therefore our everyday life, our customs and traditions themselves are, as Emerson argues elsewhere, a "tottering basis" (*LL*, II, 280), a "groundless ground" (*LL*, II, 280). And this for Emerson "is the precise symbol of our whole position in the universe, our whole social and moral status" (*LL*, II, 280).

The test of war

America, as an idea, in Emerson's writing thus emerges as a criticism of historicity, as a construct that prevents and precludes its own historic specificity and whose historical situation must always remain "in flux", "transient," and ambivalent, that is: haunted by the contradictory ghosts of its past and its future.

> "So our life, which had its beginning a few summers ago from a sorry succession of some dull material causes, walks with God on the other side through time and chance, through the fall of suns and systems, through unbounded ages, unhurt and immortal. 'T is the rich treasure in earthen vessels. Such being the character of our life, such must also be the character of its descriptions. If a man carefully examine his thoughts he will be surprised to find how much he lives in the future. His well being is always ahead." (*J*, II, 168)

Emerson's conception of America's present is then a kind of Derridean *khora*, something irreducible to truth, impossible to identify, something written in sand, blown away by the next (historical) storm.

In "On the Name," Derrida reads and conceptualizes the slipperiness of the term *khora* in Plato's *Timaeus* (Derrida and Dutoit 1995). In Plato, *khora* carries the meanings of place or location, but Derrida points out that any definition of the term would have to acknowledge the very "textual drift" (Derrida and Dutoit 1995: 123) that seems to be "essential" to the *khora* and conceives of it as a

"necessity that is neither generative nor engendered" (Derrida and Dutoit 1995: 126). The *khora* is a non-name then for something that refuses to be named, for what philosophy cannot name. Derrida's comments on the *chora* are relevant to our concerns here because the *khora* identifies a certain 'not knowing' in (the being of) every identity. This is relevant not only for our discussion of Emerson's problematization of America's identity, it also suggests a model with which to describe the import of Emerson's writing or *écriture*. I have shown how Emerson interacts with contemporary historicist discourses only to renounce them in favour of a more complex historicism that includes both an understanding of how history is made in writing as well as the possibility of the failure of that writing of history. For Emerson, literature is a historical mode. But it is also the discourse of literature or poetry that can exhibit the failures of history, that can show how once a historical account has been established, all other "histories" will be lost. While literature may consequently stand as an example of history, even as a representative discourse of history, it extends beyond this relation to include something of what Emerson calls a more "radical correspondence" (*W*, I, 29) which is itself not reducible to history. Rather, here the representativity of historical discourse, its ability to establish a correspondence between text and event is challenged insofar as Emerson draws attention to that which is eventful in the text itself, to that which is *the event of the text*. That is, we need to pay attention to the ways in which the effects of semiology, the effects of signification, and the material effects of the text form a dimension of rhetorics that both is and is not an effect of history. In other words: History and writing subsist precisely because of these more "radical correspondences".

There is, however, as I will show in the following, in Emerson a certain hesitation as to whether an unbounded, chaotic present or, for that matter, it description in literature or poetry can be in a sense *instrumental* in bringing about the next epoch of American civilization. That is, Emerson's estimation of the potential "plannability" or "programmability" of the epochal threshold changes over time and he gradually comes to see the role of the scholar or poet as the harbinger or even herald of a new epoch in a rather bleak light. Emerson's comments on the notion and the fact of "war" in his essay of the same title will here serve as a kind of litmus test to gauge how he assesses the potential of a contingent, unorganized, and unprecedented present. After all, the brilliant hope that Emerson had placed in the American scholar for a reformation of American Culture will be utterly devastated by the horrors of the Civil War.

In the lecture "War" (*W*, XI, 149-176), delivered in the spring of 1838, Emerson starts by way of presenting war as a kind of Schmittean state of exception, as the aporia of an interregnum, that by means of its violence brings about the next epoch in human history. Even tough, Emerson argues, war may seem "to sane men at the present day [...] to look like an epidemic insanity,

breaking out here and there like the cholera or influenza, infecting men's brains instead of their bowels" (*W*, XI, 151), he nevertheless sees the "copious bloodshed" (*W*, XI, 152) of war as "necessary" (*W*, XI, 151). On the one hand then, "[o]n its own scale, on the virtues it loves, [war] endures no counterfeit, but shakes the whole society until every atom falls into the place its specific gravity assigns it" (*W*, XI, 152). War, I take Emerson to say, is instrumental in bringing about the new era. On the other hand, however, war is a phenomenon that is itself historical, a nuisance that, given time, will no longer exist. Emerson, whose reception of a Hegelian philosophy of history I have outlined before, sees war as a mere stage in the progressive development of thought: Commenting on the human race's penchant for the "brutish form" (*W*, XI, 160) of war, Emerson is convinced that the "eternal germination of the better has unfolded new powers, new instincts, which were really concealed under this rough and base rind" (*W*, XI, 160). There is, then, a twist in Emerson's argument that has gone unnoticed: the events of war are themselves only a "form" expressing a certain stage in the progressive history of ideas. Emerson here gives precedence to ideas rather than events and, thus, the priority is not to avoid war, but rather to avoid the ideas that are expressed by the "form" of war: "[I]f the rising generation can be provoked to think it unworthy to nestle into every abomination of the past, and shall feel the generous darings of austerity and virtue; then war has a short day, and human blood will cease to flow" (*W*, XI, 175). We need to be able to conceive of the possibility of peace, we need to be able to "think" peace in order to avoid war. Thus he asks what may, at first sight, seem like a rather naïve question: "Cannot peace be, as well as war?" (*W*, XI, 160). But the question challenges his readers to think first the attainability and implications of the idea of peace before calling for this or that political programme to secure it.

Emerson's complex argument again turns historicist dogma on its head when he argues that it is not events (in the sense of a *Realgeschichte*) but rather ideas that define the age. Although war still "break[s] out here and there" (*W*, XI, 151) it is precisely the way in which his age has begun to think the idea of peace that for him indicates that America is entering a new era:

> "The idea itself is the epoch; the fact that it has become so distinct to any small number of persons as to become a subject of prayer and hope, of concert and discussion, – that is the commanding fact. This having come, much more will follow. Revolutions go not backward. The star once risen, though only one man in the hemisphere has yet seen its upper limb in the horizon, will mount and mount, until it becomes visible to other men, to multitudes, and climbs the zenith of all eyes. And so, it is not a great matter how long men refuse to believe the advent of peace: war is on its last legs; and a universal peace is as sure as is the prevalence of civilization over barbarism, of liberal governments over feudal forms. The question for us is only, *How soon*?" (*W*, XI, 161)

Of course we can always argue in hindsight that Emerson was, plainly and simply, wrong in his assessment of the times, after all, the "rising star" of peace he had

envisioned was thrown out of its orbit by a brutal Civil War twenty years later. But what is at stake for Emerson in his contemporaries' refusal "to *belief* the advent of peace" (*W*, XI, 161; my emphasis) is the power of ideas to form a new era. If only they were to invest in this new and yet untried idea of peace, Emerson hopes, the whole system of beliefs and values would change as the sedimented forms that we use to express these beliefs and values would themselves be recirculated and thus make new ideas sayable, thinkable: "This having come, much more will follow" (*W*, XI, 161). Again, then, we find here the already familiar gesture of Emerson's criticism of historicism that combines a call for the urgency of the problem *now* with the inevitable insight that the coming of the new idea will necessarily be deferred – "The question for us is only, *How soon?*" (*W*, XI, 161).

Emerson is of course fully aware "[t]hat the project of peace should appear visionary to great numbers of sensible men" and that it "should appear [...] to be embarrassed with extreme practical difficulties" (*W*, XI, 161). But the phrase "the idea itself is the epoch" in a nutshell contains his redefinition of historicism in terms not of specificity, of what is, but, rather, in terms of what might be, had we only the (linguistic, rhetorical, poetic, philosophical) means to conceive of it. As so often in Emerson, it is not events themselves that bring about change. Rather, our use of language opens up a horizon of possibility that makes not only new things sayable, but has the power to itself give rise to events. As we have seen in Chapter Four, this is what Emerson terms "correspondence," the overflowing of language, poetry and literature into life so that the movement of language (the way in which it refigures, recirculates, etc.) itself galvanizes into the movement of our lifes. The avoidance of war and the advent of peace, then, is dependant not upon a political program (e.g. an American paradigm of non-intervention) but rather on a process of (poetic) figuration that lets us think new ideas and thereby lets old ideas "melt away":

> "It is really a thought that built this portentous war-establishment, and a thought shall also melt it away. Every nation and every man instantly surround themselves with a material apparatus which exactly corresponds to their moral state, or their state of thought. Observe how every truth and every error, each a thought of some man's mind, clothes itself with societies, houses, cities, language, ceremonies, newspapers. Observe the ideas of the present day, – orthodoxy, skepticism, missions, popular education, temperance, anti-masonry, anti-slavery; see how each of these abstractions has embodied itself in an imposing apparatus in the community; and how timber, brick, lime and stone have flown into convenient shape, obedient to the master-idea reigning in the minds of many persons." (*W*, XI, 163)

What Emerson terms the "imposing apparatus" is the sedimentation of a political process into institutionalized forms, and the passage makes explicit that he thinks this "embodiment" of thought is unavoidable. There is a danger however, Emerson reminds us, because as soon as these forms have become an "imposing apparatus" they are no longer perceived to be momentary expressions of the present state of

society but become mere unmarked circumstances. Emerson then argues that the sights of America's military apparatus all around the country are precisely such expressions of what was once a momentary expression of society's situation but has now become an unmarked ("eternal") circumstance: "We have all grown up in the sight of frigates and navy yards, of armed forts and islands, of arsenals and militia" (*W*, XI, 163). The military apparatus produces its own necessities, but Emerson wants "to put trust in ideas, and not in circumstances" (*W*, XI, 163). Again, the potential for change is here located not in events but rather in the contingencies of what Emerson variously terms thought, language, spirit: "The least change in the man will change his circumstances" (*W*, XI, 165f.). But to embrace this potential for change again means to accept a certain eccentricism or exotism, because ideas that bring about new epochs will not be pre-contained in the discourses that we use at any given moment: "There is no good now enjoyed by society, that was not once as problematical and visionary as this" (*W*, XI, 163).

How can such a politics – one that cannot and must not be instrumentalised as a political programmatics – be instigated? In Emerson's words: "How is this new aspiration of the human mind to be made visible and real? How is it to pass out of thoughts into things?" (*W*, XI, 170), he asks, carefully choosing the tentative "aspirations" to indicate how precarious this process of the progression of the human mind and culture is. And he continues:

> "Not, certainly, in the first place, *in the way of routine and mere forms*, – the universal specific of modern politics; not by organizing a society, and going through a course of resolutions and public manifestoes, and being thus accredited to the public [...] . We have played this game to tediousness. [...] This is not to be carried by public opinion, but by private opinion, by private conviction, by private, dear, and earnest love" (*W*, XI, 170f–71)

And returning to the question of "Cannot peace be, as well as war?", Emerson argues that

> "if, for example, [man] could be inspired with a tender kindness to the souls of men, and should come to feel that every man was another self with whom he might come to join, as left hand works with right. Every degree of the ascendency of this feeling would cause the most striking changes of external things: the tents would be struck; the men-of-war would rot ashore; the arms rust; the cannon would become street-posts; the pikes, a fisher's harpoon; the marching regiment would be a caravan of emigrants, peaceful pioneers at the fountains of the Wabash and the Missouri. (*W*, XI, 166)

Emerson utopian vision of a peaceful and thus *changed* America does not rely on its established institutions (its military apparatus, etc.) or known authorities (the genealogy of founding fathers). Rather, it builds upon the contingent potential of human interaction and requires an unconditional openness to the other that Emerson expresses as "private, dear, and earnest love". This "politics" then is similar to what Jacques Derrida has called a "politics of Friendship" that commences "in the friendship of an alliance without institution" (Derrida 1994: 86).

Derrida argues such a politics of friendship always presents itself as "a deconstruction of the genealogical schema," so that it becomes possible "to think and live a politics, a friendship, a justice which begin by breaking with their naturalness or their homogeneity, with their alleged place of origin" (Derrida 1997: 105). I think that Derrida's comments on friendship can be applied to Emerson's investigation of the possibility of peace, since it envisions a similarly radical reduction of a general political scenario to the field of private interaction. While Emerson's contemporaries call for America's rise to world power, he exceptionally restages American politics on the level of human interaction and transfers the progress of the nation into man, "because in himself reside infinite resources" (*W*, XI, 172). This is not merely a reinforced, extreme version of the doctrine of American individualism, rather, I want to read it as a relocation of the progress of culture to what is, essentially, *not proper* to it. Because for Emerson, these "infinite resources" are a kind of original heterogeneity in man that is not and will not entirely be made commensurate with culture. These "infinite resources" consequently stand for nothing more and nothing less than the principle of hope that the epigram to the essay "War" establishes: "The archangel Hope / Looks to the azure cope, / Waits through dark ages for the morn, / Defeated day by day, but unto Victory born" (*W*, XI, 149).

Given this radical reformulation of American politics as a means to ensure a potential for change, it comes as no surprise that Emerson does not want to anticipate or predetermine America's future politics. When he argues that the "present fabric of our society and the present course of events" (*W*, XI, 175) points to the "[t]he proposition of the Congress of Nations" (*W*, XI, 175), this is obviously only a very general vision of the future. He does, however, not give up on the idea that it is in America (and not in the nations of the old continent) that this change will happen. Therefore he argues that in America

> "[t]here is the highest fitness in the place and time in which this enterprise is begun. Not in an obscure corner, not in a feudal Europe, not in an antiquated appanage where no onward step can be taken without rebellion, is this seed of benevolence laid in the furrow, with tears of hope; but in this broad America of God and man, where the forest is only now falling, or yet to fall, and the green earth opened to the inundation of emigrant men from all quarters of oppression and guilt; here, where not a family, not a few men, but mankind, shall say what shall be; here, we ask, Shall it be War, or shall it be Peace?" (*W*, XI, 175f.)

The passage makes clear that Emerson thinks of America's future as *yet to be decided* and, as we have already seen in Chapter One, his assessment of the likelihood of change for America changes over time. While his early essays sing America's praise as a nation in which change is continually happening, Emerson is much more skeptical about the chances for change in his later essays. However, with the advent of the Civil War, Emerson sees America's prospects radically challenged or even annihilated. He is no longer certain whether change will

happen all by itself and in view of the "conspiracy of slavery" (*W*, XI, 297) he is at a loss to explain how America's change could go so completely wrong. "[T]hey call it an institution, I call it a destitution, – this stealing of men and setting them to work" (*W*, XI, 297), Emerson says, expressing his perplexity, and asks: "Why cannot the best civilization be extended over the whole country, since the disorder of the less-civilized portion menaces the existence of the country?" (*W*, XI, 299). And it is precisely or notably in this conundrum of being presented with America's two minds – its thinking of peace or equality yet also its refusal to abolish slavery – that Emerson returns to historicist thought and to the question of whether a war may be instrumental in bringing about America's new epoch.

In April in 1861, the situation has fundamentally changed, and so is Emerson's mood when he delivers a lecture in Boston on "Civilization at a Pinch". On January 31, 1862, at the Smithsonian institute in Washington, Emerson delivers a revised version of the lecture, entitled "American Civilization," in which he revisits some of his earlier comments on war, now all inflected by the current crisis:

> "'There are periods,' said Niebuhr, 'when something much better than happiness and security of life is attainable.' We live in a new and exceptionable age. America is another word for Opportunity. Our whole history appears like a last effort of the Divine Providence in behalf of the human race; and a literal slavish following of precedents, as by a justice of the peace, is not for those who at this hour lead the destinies of this people. The evil you contend with has taken alarming proportions, and you still content yourself with parrying the blow it aims, but, as if enchanted, abstain from striking at the cause." (*W*, XI, 299f.)

Emerson here juxtaposes the earlier essays theme of America's opportunity – its promise of a better or at least changed world, its promise of "peace" – to the greatest evil, "the alarming proportions" of the institution of slavery that had led America into its civil war. That he is taking his cue from Barthold Georg Niebuhr here is significant insofar as it stresses his epochal concerns: Niebuhr had formulated a trailblazing study of history in his *Vorlesungen über Römische Geschichte* and his work focused on the question of the *Zeitalter* as well as on the modalities of the *Zeitenwende*. For Emerson, the question of war's legitimacy is connected to the question of a decision of the age. That is: Emerson is not sure whether a call for war will be a legitimate response to the present conundrum of America's division over the issue of slavery or whether to live up to its "opportunity" would mean something along the lines of a more radical *laissez-faire* acquiescence. What does one do if, even in the face of the evil of slavery, one cannot see how Americans "could be inspired with a tender kindness to the souls of men" (*W*, XI, 166)? In other words: What does one do if all the signs of the times show that America has taken the wrong path? What are the options for political intervention now that all hope has been lost?

> "If the American people hesitate, it is not for want of warning or advices. The telegraph has been swift enough to announce our disasters. The journals have not suppressed the

> extent of the calamity. Neither was there any want of argument or of experience. Neither was anything concealed of the theory or practice of slavery." (*W*, XI, 300)

Confronted with the evil of slavery – and Emerson never wavered in his call for abolition – and an increasing national divide, Emerson hesitates as to the legitimacy of war as a last measure. While Emerson knows that the American republic needs a violent shake-up to wrest itself free of the evil of slavery, he fears that to use war as a means of bringing about America's next age would inevitably mean the precontainment of a politics. This is why the civil war and slavery come as the great tests for Emerson's 'theory' of the advent of America's age of democracy. Reading the signs of the times (the "warning and advices"), Emerson's response is somewhat unrevealing, if not to say misplaced, if we assess it in terms of the politics it suggests for solving the crisis of the Civil War. Again, his solution to this dilemma works according to the principles I have outlined in previous chapters: the promise of change does not come in the form of changed circumstances, it is a matter of language and of expression. Here in "American Civilization," change again comes in the guise of a refigurative move: Emerson explains that the war is a consequence of ideas becoming ends in themselves and, therefore, to bring about change, these ideas (and the tropes that describe them) need to be refigured or, even, substituted by new ones. In a decisive and characteristic move at the end of "American Civilization," Emerson thus renounces all the terms that have become standard designators of America's freedom and instead introduces a new one, "morality": "It is not free institutions, it is not a republic, it is not a democracy, that is the end, - no, but only the means. Morality is the object of government" (*W*, XI, 309). Morality thus stands here for the principle of change itself, for what, just twenty-five years later, Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* will describe as the possibility of an "Umwerthung aller Werthe" (*KSA*, V, 269). In late Emerson, this possibility of a revaluation of the tropes of our discourse as well as the unpredictability or contingency of individual speech defines the possibility of freedom itself, as the concluding passages of "American Civilization" on Lincoln suggest:

> "This is the consolation on which we rest in the darkness of the future and the afflictions of to-day, that the government of the world is moral, and does forever destroy what is not. […] Since the above pages were written, President Lincoln has proposed to Congress that the government shall cooperate with any state that shall enact a gradual abolishment of slavery. In the recent series of national successes, this message is the best. It marks the happiest day in the political year. The American Executive ranges itself for the first time on the side of freedom. […] He speaks his own thought in his own style. All thanks and honor to the Head of the State! […] If Congress accords with the President, it is not yet too late to begin the emancipation; but we think it will always be too late to make it gradual. (*W*, XI, 309-11)

Understanding and Abandonment

Emerson never lost his interest in the question of how to secure America's political progress and the advent of its new age. However, unlike some of his contemporaries he was not a social reformer in the sense that he proposed new social experiments, associations, legislations, etc. His credentials as a social reformer are questionable and his comments on the political agenda of his day more often than not remain strangely inconclusive (see also Chapter One). The historicist re-evaluation of Emerson's writing under the auspices of a "de-transcendentalizing" in recent criticism, its assumption that his writing is reducible to the social and political concerns of his time has ignored that the restaging of Emerson's "transcendentalism" as something that is to be explained with recourse to the concrete materialities of his contemporary world (race, class, gender, etc.), cannot explain Emerson's silence on much of the social concerns of his era – the issue of slavery being the most obvious exception. Also, the historicist's bias towards bringing Emerson's eccentricism back into accord with contemporary realities necessarily had to ignore the ways in which his writing imagines a politics or, rather, a potential for politics in what precisely cannot be brought to accord with contemporary political concerns, in what Emerson conceives of as an irresolvable dualism between the world of thought and that of action, or the world of politics and that of nature, for that matter. It comes as no surprise then that the historicist reduction of Emerson's transcendental writing as something that is continuous with much of nineteenth century American social history had to blatantly ignore Emerson's interest in "nature" or in a "method of nature," that is, in processes or "worlds of life" not already contained in the world of contemporary politics. "Hear the rats in the wall, see the lizard on the fence, the fungus under foot, the lichen on the log. What do I know sympathetically, morally, of either of these worlds of life?" (*W*, II, 39). "Nature" is therefore that which goes beyond what we imagine as our world, our politics, our ordinariness, and it is a disruptive force both within Emerson's writing as well as within his re-evaluation of historicist and political discourses.

Henry David Thoreau says in "Walking" that "[p]olitics is but a narrow field and that still narrower highway yonder leads to it" (Thoreau 1993: 53). Other than Emerson, Thoreau will choose to leave the narrowness of political institutions, of what Emerson calls "church and state and school" (*W*, IX, 202) and what Thoreau calls "Church and State and People" (Thoreau 1993: 50). Thoreau moves out of a life guaranteed by the institutions of our lifes into nature where he starts his radical experiment of a 'community of one' at Walden pond, accepting the necessities of daily life as his only 'institutions'. Emerson's experiment is less 'literal' as it conceives of "nature" as a general principle countering the anthropocentric urges of individualism so that the 'good' may "take the way from man, not to man" (*W*, II, 68-9). For my formulation of Emerson's political interest and of what I have

termed the danger of instrumentalisation, the notion of "nature" is important because it offers a vision of processes where "[w]e can point nowhere to anything final," where only "tendency appears on all hands" (*W*, I, 203). Nature comes to function as the antagonist of politics or policies, as it always relates not "to any number of particular ends, but to numberless and endless benefit" (*W*, I, 204). There is then the generative movement of "total nature" (*W*, I, 203), which goes against the anthropomorphic tendencies of American individualism, against a "private will" (*W*, I, 204) that Emerson sees at work elsewhere in American politics, a will that it dissolves in a "redundancy or excess of life" (*W*, I, 204). This does not mean that Emerson renounces the 'human' *per se*, but he endeavours to initiate a politics that is open also to what is yet beyond our current definitions of the 'human'. "Nature" here holds the promise of *another* politics because it necessitates "the equal serving of innumerable ends without the least emphasis or preference to any [...] [It] can only be conceived as existing to a universal and not to a particular end, to a universe of ends, and not to one" (*W*, I, 200-1).

Emerson's insistence on "nature" as something that goes beyond our political intentions is meant to provide a counterpoint to the danger of political instrumentation:

> "At present, man applies to nature but half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone. He lives in it and masters it by a penny-wisdom; and he that works most in it is but a half-man, and whilst his arms are strong and his digestion good, his mind is imbruted, and he is a selfish savage. His relation to nature, his power over it, is through the understanding, as by manure [...] ." (*W*, I, 72)

To apply his whole force to nature would mean to accept its irreducibility to the understanding – or to "intellection" (*W*, II, 308), as Emerson sometimes prefers to call it. Our relation to nature is consequently governed by nature's irreducibility to our social, political and philosophical concerns; "nature," as Emerson states with regards to the philosopher's quest to "dispose of nature," "will not be disposed of" (*W*, IV, 78). Nature consequently comes to function as a resistant field within our ordinary social and political practices. As Martin Seel has argued in his *Ästhetik der Natur*, nature must be conceived "als ein Stück abweichender Gestaltung dieser Praxis, als eine beharrliche Erinnerung an ihre nicht zweckgerichteten Vollzüge und Formen" (Seel 1991: 106). Thus nature comes as a corrective of an instrumental, intentional conception of politics, but it can only be initiated, as Seel argues, in our „korrespondierenden Interaktion mit der Natur" (Seel: 106).

Emerson in "The Method of Nature" (1841) describes this interaction as a form of „behold[ing]" nature as a whole "in a spirit as grand as that by which it exists" (*W*, I, 200). In nature we therefore see what George Kateb has called Emerson's "happy responsiveness to contrasting or antagonistic thoughts and phenomena" (Kateb 1995: 8), a strategy that counters the goal-orientedness of any political pragmatics. His essays show, as Kateb argues, "that meaning or beauty or truth can

be found in conflicting or incompatible ideas, principles, forces and practices" (Kateb 1995: 9). They suspend institutionalized or conventionalized philosophical or political perspectives in favour of a "radical correspondence" with the process of nature as something that holds "innumerable ends". What Kateb terms Emerson's "democratic individualism" – as a redefinition of a democratic politics conceived not in *a priori* political terms but rather as a mode of "infinite responsiveness" (Kateb 1992: 91) – consequently can only be described once we are willing to forego precisely the historicist impulse that aims to bring into accord Emerson's philosophy and his politics: it requires us to accept Emerson's dictum that when "speculating on the future in politics" we need to accept a "fluxional protean incalculable element" (*J*, 15, 286). Consequently, I would argue, both philosophy and politics are staged as encompassing and going beyond the other. The "de-transcendentalizing" of Emerson (Buell 1984: 123; Lopez 1988) forgets that it is precisely in the way in which Emerson's politics goes beyond a political programmatics and his philosophy goes beyond the systematic impulse of philosophy that its political and philosophical import is to be found. Against the historicist intention to bring his "transcendentalism" back into the concrete materialities of life (race, gender, etc.), we should recognize how it imagines a fundamental 'otherness', 'trans-humanness,' 'trans-politicalness' in nature that is not reducible to human affairs, not created for or by man. The "narrow field" (Thoreau) of culture and politics is thus opposed in Emerson to a nature that forces us into a "facility of adaptation and of transition through many related points, to wide contrasts and extremes" (*W*, VI, 137). Directionless as a matter of policy, nature suggests processes of emergence, of evolution or of movement that are not governed by the sedimentation and institutions characteristic of the political. This also explains why we need to insist that Emerson the philosopher necessarily must contradict Emerson the reformer: it is precisely by way of being philosophical that Emerson attempts to reform. "Nature" necessarily expresses an otherness that contradicts any specific reformist programme.

"Nature" and his formulation of a "method of nature" also function as essential addendums to Emerson's theory of "genius" and the collection of epoch-making "representative men" that he assembles in his essays. The genius and the representative man are epoch-makers precisely not by furthering the understanding or by proposing a new political programmatics. Rather, they find new meaning by "abandoning" themselves to a kind of Nietzschean *Vergessenheit* in the ungovernable processes of nature. As Emerson argues in "Literary Ethics": "The vision of genius comes by renouncing the too officious activity of the understanding, and giving leave and amplest privilege to the spontaneous sentiment" (*W*, I, 165). By giving space to this "power" or "force", man moves from the "centre of things" (*W*, II, 60) and becomes an "aboriginal self" (*W*, II, 63) that becomes the conduit of powers that are greater than himself. Even in the

early texts – in "The American Scholar," for example – where Emerson still insists on the centrality of the scholar, man is not an unproblematic centre: "The world, – this shadow of the soul, or *other me*, – lies wide around," but it is in fact the "attractions" of the world that can alone "unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself" (*W*, I, 95). The "unsearched might of man" (*W*, I, 114) can thus only be made accessible via a detour to that which is *other*, by a passage through the world. In later essays, this becomes more pronounced, as he now conceives of man as being on the margin or, to use a phrase in "Circles," at the "verge of the today" (*W*, II, 315), always "rushing from the center to the verge of our orbit" (*W*, II, 315), merely a witness to forces more powerful than he is. Therefore, the individual is not the harbinger of new worlds, rather, these have to be delegated to processes radically incommensurable to humanism or individualism.

The focal point of this radical refutation of a certain humanism, as put forward by American individualism, is again the term "nature," but Emerson sometimes also uses different names for it ("God," "love," "influence," "power," "force," etc.). "Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit" (*W*, I, 8), he argues and states that its "catalogue is endless" (*W*, I, 14). Emerson here comes very close to other important challengers of historicist and political dogma in the nineteenth century, especially Karl Marx: indeed, it would be interesting to compare Emerson's insistence on the 'force' of nature with Marx's recognition of the irreducibility of *praxis* as a new form of political transformation. Both Emerson and Marx are interested, I think, in what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have described as "the promise implicit in an originary opening to the 'other,' to the unforeseeable, to the pure *event*, which cannot be mastered by any aprioristic discourse" (Laclau 2002: 90). And just like for Marx and other theorists of cultural and historical progress in the nineteenth century, Emerson thinks that an opening to an incalculable other is the condition of the possibility of any cultural evolution. As he argues in "Progress of Culture":

> "Nature is brute but as this soul quickens it; Nature always the effect, mind the flowing cause. Nature, we find, is ever as is our sensibility; it is hostile to ignorance; – plastic, transparent, delightful, to knowledge. Mind carries the law; history is the slow and atomic unfolding. All things admit of this extended sense, and the universe at last is only prophetic, or, shall we say, symptomatic, of vaster interpretation and results. Nature an enormous system, but in mass and in particle curiously available to the humblest need of the little creature that walks on the earth! The immeasurableness of Nature is not more astounding than his power to gather all her omnipotence into a manageable rod or wedge, bringing it to a hair-point for the eye and hand of the philosopher." (*W*, VIII, 223-224)

Emerson's reconception of progress, his revision of the dogma of providence, and his formulation of America's political exigency, are all related to this notion of nature as something that is irreducible to the world as we know it. Nature is

"prophetic," it is "symptomatic of vaster interpretation and results," even if we cannot say what these interpretations and results are. And, paradoxically enough, its "immeasurableness" complements the mind's very own omnipotence. But it is precisely by virtue of being irreducible to human aims that it holds the promise of *another* social organization, another politics, another 'America'. Nature thus holds for Emerson something that is similar to what Jacques Derrida has called "the undeconstructibility of a certain idea of justice" (Derrida 1994: 90), that for Derrida is also the promise specific to the political 'form' of democracy. This "irreducibleness" or "undeconstructibility" of something that cannot be factored into a humanly governed evolution of our life-worlds, or, in our case, of something that cannot be made instrumental in bringing about America's new era, for Emerson (as well as for Derrida) is the condition of possibility of any politics, of meaning, and of change. In "Progress of Culture," the essay I have been quoting from, he states in the poem provided as an epigraph: "Nature spoke / To each apart [...] / Not clearly voiced, but waking a new sense / Inviting to new knowledge" (*W*, VIII, 205). This "new sense" or "new knowledge" in Emerson's 'theory' of the ages is nothing less than the advent of a new era. And because 'America,' in Emerson's writing, is a figure for the possibility of a new era, "nature," as its condition of possibility, deserves his repeated attention.

This has important implications also for Emerson's revision of the theory of the "spirit of the age": While the confrontation with nature opens up a "cleft" in history that opens the possibility of a history signified differently, this does not mean that Emerson sees this as a guarantee for America's future. "Nature" may "wake a new sense" in us, however, it also has the power to "unsettle" us insofar as it can suspend our ordinary ways of signifying our history, of making meaning. Together with the utopian vision of a different meaning of and era for 'America,' there is a danger that progress may be altogether lost or that the meaning of history might be completely hidden from us. In "Progress of Culture," Emerson is careful to also alert us to this potential of "nature": "Here stretches out of sight, out of conception even, this vast Nature, daunting, bewildering" (*W*, VIII, 224). Again then with regards to the notion of "nature," we see a kind of "postponing" or "deferral" at work here: while Emerson insists on our "responsiveness" (Kateb's term) or commitment to nature, its meaning is "out of sight", in the future, *à-venir*. Nature is thus linked closely to Emerson's conception of progress as developed in the essay "Progress of Culture." All stages in history, he argues, are subject to this kind of "postponing" as their interpretation will only fully be given in an uncertain, as of yet unspecified future. "[H]istory is the slow and atomic unfolding. All things admit of this extended sense, and the universe at last is only prophetic, or, shall we say, symptomatic, of vaster interpretation and results" (*W*, VIII, 223).

This theory of America's age as a postponed one is most compellingly formulated in Emerson's essays "Circle," "Quotation and Originality," and

"Representative Men". All identify the aspect of postponement, a kind of Derridean *à-venir* that complicates the succession of ages. This puts Emerson at a certain remove from other contemporary attempts to historicize America's epoch and makes discernible a strong Hegelian influence. While contemporary historians of America content themselves with a documentation of 'what is,' that is, with specifying America's place in history, Emerson complements this documentation with an investigation of 'what may be,' with the question of how the transition to the next 'American' epoch may be conceived. This process of transition is, like in Hegel, synonymous with the notions of 'meaning,' of 'history,' of the 'concept': that is, it is always both a description as well as a theory of the epoch and of history. Given the obvious Hegelian influence in Emerson, however, I also want to mention an important difference: Unlike Hegel's *weltgeschichtliche Individuen* Emerson's writer or scholar is not instrumental in bringing about the next epoch. His texts do not merely depict, 'representatively,' the contemporary world. Rather, the community of representative men that Emerson portrays in his essays characteristically go beyond their 'representativity'. That is, they depict a moment in which their contemporary experience is no longer 'representative' but turns into the experience of a new era; and they approach a moment in which texts are no longer mere 'representativeness' or an expression of 'contemporariness' anymore, but rather go beyond what, contemporarily, had been imaginable. Emerson then relies on both man as the centre of things as well as on something he calls "conversion," a profound change in man that comes as an "influx [...] of power," "inspiration" or "ecstasy" (*W*, I, 335). He does thus not conceive of a realization of *Geist* striving towards its self-realization. The heroes in "Representative Men" all 'representatively' stand for such a going beyond rather than merely being the sources of a kind of 'representative' expression of *Zeitgeist*. Goethe, Shakespeare, and Napoleon, Fox, Milton or Luther: they are the age in a potentiality that goes beyond the characteristics that go into its description. And thus they stand for a conversion or refiguration of the thought of their time that they are not wholly responsible for because it is a result of their intimacy with or abandonment to the process of language. Emerson therefore locates in all his "representative men" a certain willingness to commit to the *Eigensinn* of language, and it is precisely this delegation of *Geist*, thought, etc. to language that turns these men – unwillingly and unwittingly – into epoch-makers. Writing on Homer, Shakespeare and Milton, Emerson argues that these writers, "[l]ike prophets, seem but imperfectly aware of the import of their own utterances" (*W*, XII, 276), so that "the man and the poet show like a double consciousness" (*W*, XII, 276). Their language characteristically overtakes them and their writing about the contemporary world undergoes a poetic refiguration in which tropes and topoi are recirculated to depict a previously unimaginable world. This is why these "representative men" for Emerson are always the age's "unattained but attainable self" (*W*, II, 7): they

represent their age not in what is, but in what could, should, and might be. But this "attainable self," it is important to note here, cannot be calculated, it can only be aimed at by way of a radical giving over to language's potential for poetry. 'America,' very much in the sense of Cavell's moral perfectionism, is thus a striving towards a goal that may be, in the last instance, unrealizable (Cavell 1990). 'America' is thus the name for something that may well be impossible, but something that nevertheless has to be sought by a kind of "crossing, or leaping," as Cavell argues (Cavell 1992: 136).

Anselm Haverkamp has suggested, that it is precisely for this reason that the issue of "Deconstruction in/as America" may be relevant:

> "I see nobody to whom we owe as much as we owe to Jacques Derrida for his unfailing dedication to America. Take the gift, for example. 'For finally, if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it.' America is by now the age-old name for the thought, the desire, and the intention towards the impossible, like the gift (not given, but to be given). Like that 'other cape,' Cape Europe, [...] America has become a paleonym, the recitation of an old name for some hope not altogether lost." (Haverkamp 1995: 9)[7]

Haverkamp also argues convincingly that although American philosophers – Emerson, Thoreau, Cavell – do not hesitate to call America their home, they do not share the kind of nostalgic, Heideggerian vision of being at home. "The substantive disagreement with Heidegger," Haverkamp quotes Cavell, is "that the achievement of the human requires not the inhabitation and settlement but abandonment, leaving" (Haverkamp 1995: 9; Cavell 1992: 138). To use the Emersonian phrase: "People wish to be settled: only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them" (*W*, II, 320). The hope connected to 'America' is one that is thus underwritten by the risk of unsettling. But "unsettling," in Emerson, is not so much a matter of abandoning our houses but rather of our willingness to confront a potential in language. This becomes obvious in the following passage from "Circles," where Emerson talks about what it means to be a writer: "I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back" (*W*, II, 318). Even if this "unsettling" may never quite pay off our debt to the past, Emerson nevertheless envisions a confrontation with language that by recirculating tropes and figures "unsettles" the sedimented forms that we are ordinarily using and takes them beyond the conventions of our discourses to provide new meanings.

"Unsettling" could thus be described as the hope for a synthesis (the future of *another* meaning) that goes beyond what went into its making, something that is qualitatively different and not deducible from the past or present state of language and culture. In the terms of Emerson's comments on "representative men," this

7 Jacques Derrida has repeatedly argued that democracy, as the "political experience of opening to the other," is precisely an "experience of the impossible," see Derrida et al. 2002: 194.

"unsettling" comes as an extension of the subject to what is beyond itself: towards "nature", towards "life", etc. "Shakspeare," for example, is a "new and larger subject than had ever existed" (W, IV, 218). As we have already seen, Emerson uses various terms for this process of extension: "passion," "enthusiasm," "abandonment," "detachment," "poetry," and "ecstasy" are among the most frequently used. Here is Emerson commenting on the process of "passion" in *Conduct of Life*:

> "Passion, though a bad regulator, is a powerful spring. Any absorbing passion has the effect to deliver from the little coils and cares of every day: 'tis the heat which sets our human atoms spinning, overcomes the friction of crossing thresholds, and first addresses in society, and gives us a good start and speed, easy to continue, when once it is begun. In short, there is no man who is not at some time indebted to his vices" (*W*, VI, 259).

Passion denotes a process that allows for the "crossing of thresholds" as it overrides the frictional resistance associated with cultural and subjective identities. Its "ever-proceeding detachment" (W, IV, 30) allows for a *rite de passage* in which the accustomed ways of our culture are sent "spinning" from their sedimentary bed. This is why for Emerson "enthusiasm" and "abandonment" are merely the flipsides of the same coin: they both describe a process in which we challenge the hold of our conventionalized ways in language, culture, politics. As Cavell argues:

> "The idea of abandonment contains what the preacher in Emerson calls enthusiasm, or the New Englander in him calls forgetting ourselves, together with what he calls leaving or relief or quitting or release or shunning or allowing of deliverance, […] together further with something he means by trusting or suffering […]. " (Cavell 2003: 18)

On the one hand, Emerson argues in "Circles," that "nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm" (*W*, II, 321) but he also insists that "there can be no greatness without abandonment" (*W*, II, 181). Enthusiasm as well as abandonment are thus forces which are never under the complete control of the individual. They are, as in the essay "The Over-Soul," "something incalculable," the "alien energy" that goes beyond "the will I call mine" (*W*, II, 268): a force that always overwhelms private will. This is why Emerson also states in the same essay that we "do not yet possess ourselves, […] and we know at the same time that we are much more" (*W*, II, 278). To possess ourselves, however, would mean precisely to know about "impersonality," about that which goes beyond ourselves, which would mean that we became indifferent to the fate "I call mine", a point that Emerson will finally make in *Fate*, as Sharon Cameron has pointed out (Cameron 1998: 3). The themes of "abandonment" and "enthusiasm" thus return us to the theme of the "two minds" that I have dealt with in Chapter One: the crux of Emerson's genius on "the verge of to-day" (*W*, II, 315) – in its abandonment as well as in its enthusiasm – is that the two modes can never entirely be separated. This is why Emerson's genius necessarily resembles that other important figure standing 'between the times': just like Hamlet who observes a "time out of joint,"

Emerson's genius both in its commitment (to political change, to meaning, etc.) as well as in its detachment (from ordinary life, from common sense) is at the mercy of forces more powerful than himself.

It is important to add here that Emerson's investigation of "abandonment" and "enthusiasm" also challenge philosophy's self-description as an all-inclusive system of thought. It is precisely in these processes that philosophy's place as the 'first science' is challenged: philosophy, given its tendency towards typology, rationality, and systematization, cannot account for them. This becomes obvious, for example, when Emerson talks about Plato's writings in "Representative Men" and argues that they "have not, – what is no doubt incident to this regnancy of intellect in his work, – the vital authority which the screams of prophets and the sermons of unlettered Arabs and Jews possess" (*W*, IV, 76).

If Emerson values intuition, then, this is not merely the standard Romantic valuation of the primitive or the naïve. Here, the "unlettered Arabs and Jews" embody a more "vital authority," a force that challenges or stands in a conflictual nature with the "regnancy of intellect". In Plato, Emerson sees the philosopher just barely managing to forgo the danger of philosophy's inclination towards rigid systematization, and how he avoids this danger is by way of his implication in something that philosophy would like to ostracize: the literary:

> "He is intellectual in his aim; and therefore, in expression, literary. Mounting into heaven, diving into the pit, expounding the laws of the state, the passion of love, the remorse of crime, the hope of the parting soul, – he is literary, and never otherwise" (*W*, IV, 57).

"Being literary" means to hand over authority from the "regnancy of the intellect" to the material processes of a literary mode of writing with its shift of topics, themes, metaphors, etc., that will counter philosophy's intention to find a transparent language. It is precisely this willing delegation of intellect to language that Emerson calls "abandonment." This "abandonment," this kind of *Überantwortung* (the German term here holds the double connotation of "commitment" as well as "delegation") to semiology for Emerson is a function of writing, or, rather, of poetry, and the poet becomes a poet-genius by a willing commitment to such an *Überantwortung* to language and writing. Emerson's interest could consequently be described precisely in terms of what his contemporary Hegel, in the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* and with a different aim, has called the "Abfall der Idee von sich selbst," (*TWA*, IX, 28), or, equally, what Hegel calls the "Metamorphose" (*TWA*, IX, 31) of concepts themselves, namely a kind of defection from or abandonment to the idea in writing. Emerson, not unlike Hegel, conceives of this process as incalculable, as something that can never be instrumentalised (as a philosophical technique or topology) but that nevertheless yields change. In Hegel's system, this change is also synonymous with philosophy. Emerson's take, however, seems to be even

more radical and precludes the formulation and critical hermeneutics of a dialectic (in the sense of a process that is goal-oriented) as he insists that it is only in literary writing that we can truly abandon ourselves to the effects of semiology. His comments on abandonment and on writing radically question the value of the individual's role in coming up with new meaning and underline a point that Paul De Man has made about the nature of literary language in general: "[I]t follows from the rhetorical nature of literary language that the cognitive function resides in the language and not the subject" (De Man 1983: 137).

Talking about Hegel's *Abfall*, one cannot but remember Heidegger's denigration of America as "Abfall" as well as his observations on America's "Ruinanz" (ruinancy). While *Ruinanz* in early Heidegger is synonymous with the term "modernity," it later comes to be replaced by Heidegger's depreciatory term "Amerikanismus," by which Heidegger means to denote a general "Trübung" of Dasein (see Ermath 2000).[8] This American obfuscation (*Trübung*) of being, for Heidegger, is the origin of a lasting darkening of the world as we know it (*Weltverdüsterung*). For Emerson, however, it is precisely in such an obfuscation, in such a semiological *Abfall* that he finds America's potential for renewal, for hope, etc. Other than Heidegger, who is obsessed with the authentic and the fact of its loss, Emerson is willing to accept the loss of 'America's' authenticity, if there ever was such a thing, and is even prepared to lose 'America' itself, if it potentially enables the advent of *another* 'America'. An America, I would argue, in which the democratic community is precisely conceived of as an aesthetic project or tropological work.

Emerson quest is therefore not an attempt to re-establish a certain mysticism or to somehow pretend that modernity has never happened. Emerson already knows about the dangers of reason monomaniacally posited that Melville will give its great literary testament to in *Moby-Dick.* Ahab's total interpretation of the world ("All are Ahab"), that he utters with reference to the doubloon that is nailed to the mast, is the vision of the other extreme of a world in which everything means, where "significance lurks" in all things, and where there is no influx of chance or contingency:

> "But one morning, turning to pass the doubloon, he seemed to be newly attracted by the strange figures and inscriptions stamped on it, as though now for the first time beginning to interpret for himself in some monomaniac way whatever significance lurked in them. And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as

8 This denigration of America as "Abfall," as a form of inauthentic life is of course not exclusive to Heidegger and has a long history in European philosophy: it starts with Rilke's description of America's inauthentic life, of America as "*Lebensattrappe*" in a letter to Witold Hulewicz on November, 13 1925 (Rilke et al. 1991: II, 376-77), and then is taken up in Oswald Spengler, Hans Zehrer, the Jüngers, Max Weber, Alexandre Kojève, Arnold Gehlen, and others. For an overview, see Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* (1992). For Martin Heidegger's account of America's degeneracy, see James W. Ceaser's "Katastrophenhaft: Martin Heidegger's America" (1997).

> they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way." (Melville and Tanselle 1983: 1253)

Emerson shows that aesthetic or poetic thought is always in a relation of correspondence with our realities: it cannot be founded by recourse to a language that was previously established as transparent. Rather, it has to confront the contingencies of our ways of creating the world. And it is this opacity of being, of nature that opens up the future but at the same time reminds us that there can be no 'pure' break from what we are for the future: our implication in history, in our generation, in what we are is irreducible, there is no such thing as a clean break with the past or the present. But if this is true, it also means, that we can only see the other, the future, etc. when we divert or defect (*abfallen*) at least minimally from the safe course of history. In Emerson, 'individualism' and 'America' are two names for this kind of self-differentiation of culture and the individual from themselves. They are an *Abfall* that may itself be the productive source of something else. And this paradox movement of *Abfall* also characterizes the Emersonian present insofar as it is always a waning as well as an emergence. In the sense of a Heideggerian *Inzwischen* (*GA* 65, 371-392), the present moment presents a radical difference that cannot be integrated into a dialectics because it comes as an eccentricity that both is and is not (yet).

We find this paradox potential of a radical 'nihilism,' in which something is "on its way" (*W*, III, 185) but cannot yet be calculated because it does not yet know what it will be, also in Emerson's successors Nietzsche and Heidegger. In Emerson, this necessarily unacknowledged potential of abandonment or of unsettling is often labelled "forgetting" (see *W*, XII, 77, 101). Heidegger calls it "Vergessenheit." For both Emerson and Heidegger, forgetting indirectly speaks of a radical difference, that – because it cannot be known as a radical difference – can only be encountered intermittently, inconsistently and as a surprise. This is why forgetting can be the spring of a thinking out of the open, in the open, but not in the sense of something that can be planned or calculated (*GA* XI, 55). Forgetting is only an "instrumental" process insofar as it may help to activate an untapped potential in our cultural present and thus may serve to enable the advent of a qualitatively different future. As Emerson states in "Quotation and Originality": "The profound apprehension of the Present is Genius, which makes the Past forgotten" (*W*, VIII, 201). And in a sentence that could be taken straight from Nietzsche: "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory" (*W*, II, 321). Again, then, this anticipates the Nietzsche in *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne* who argues that philosophy has forgotten the "metaphoricity" of language. I have quoted the passage before, but I reproduce it here for convenience's sake:

> "Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch

> und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden, und die nach langem Gebrauche einem Volke fest, canonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, dass sie welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind […].“ (*KSA*, I, 881-2)

Nietzsche argues that in our ordinary uses of words, we tend to forget the figurative dimension of any utterance. Himself at the receiving end of a certain kind of historicism, he also argues that history, by positing what seems to be a transparent, straightforward narrative, lets us forget the conflicting potentials of the present moment. Against the historian's impulse to recollect the past, Nietzsche's new philosopher is the conduit of a creative force (“schöpferische Kraft”) that makes the past and the present discontinuous with each other and thus enables the advent of the new. And just as Emerson criticizes a “love of repose” (*W*, II, 22) and calls for reinvigoration of America's “optative mood” (*W*, I, 341), Nietzsche, in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben,* attacks an “objektiv sich gebärdende Gleichgültigkeit” (*KSA*, I, 293) to reinstate “das Recht dessen, was jetzt werden soll” (*KSA*, I, 254). In Nietzsche too, this “plastische Kraft” (*KSA*, I, 252) needs to remain incalculable if it is to potentially bring about the future:

> “Die historische Bildung ist vielmehr nur im Gefolge einer mächtigen neuen Lebensströmung, einer werdenden Kultur zum Beispiel, etwas Heilsames und Zukunft-Verheissendes, also nur dann, wenn sie von einer höheren Kraft beherrscht und geführt wird und nicht selber herrscht und führt.” (*KSA*, I, 258)

In his reformulation of historicism, Nietzsche takes his cue from Emerson and gives life priority over history and emerging forces priority over recorded facts, to argue that an overemphasis on history turns the historian into a „Totengräber des Gegenwärtigen“ (*KSA*, I, 252). Finally, in a revision of Emerson's remarks on the riddle of the Sphinx, Nietzsche remarks that “[d]er Spruch der Vergangenheit ist immer ein Orakelspruch: nur als Baumeister der Zukunft, als Wissende der Gegenwart werdet ihr ihn verstehen” (*KSA*, I, 295). Thus the present comes as an antagon of history, and even tough it acquires its form through and as a result of history, it also holds the potential of overcoming that form. The “Dunstschicht des Unhistorischen” (*KSA*, I, 254) that the contemporary moment presents, establishes a discontinuity that allows for a horizon of possibility, for what Nietzsche calls a “lebendige Zukunft” (*KSA*, I, 297).[9]

As we have seen, in Emerson it is precisely the “to-day,” as the ahistorical moment “in the present, above time,” that guarantees such a future. And this also explains why genius is never to be found simply in an individual or a

9 This is why Nietzsche argues that the *un*historical alone can guarantee an evolution of the human: “Es ist wahr: erst dadurch, dass der Mensch denkend, überdenkend, vergleichend, trennend, zusammenschließend jenes unhistorische Element einschränkt, erst dadurch dass innerhalb jener umschließenden Dunstwolke ein heller, blitzender Lichtschein entsteht, also erst durch die Kraft, das Vergangene zum Leben zu gebrauchen und aus dem Geschehenen wieder Geschichte zu machen, wird der Mensch zum Menschen: aber in einem Uebermasse von Historie hört der Mensch wieder auf, und ohne jene Hülle des Unhistorischen würde er nie angefangen haben und anzufangen wagen.“ (*KSA*, I, 254)

"representative man" but rather in an "original force" (*W*, IV, 34). It is precisely such an "original force" or "passion," as Emerson argues in "Memory" that may give us the future:

> "With every broader generalization which the mind makes, with every deeper insight, – its retrospect also is wider; with every new insight into the duty or fact of today, we come into new possession of the past. When we live by principles instead of traditions, – by obedience to the law of the mind, instead of by passion, the great mind will enter into us, – not as now in fragments and detached thoughts, and the light of today will shine backward and forward. Memory is a presumption of a possession of the Future. Now, we are halves. We see the past, but not the future. But in that day, will the hemisphere complete itself, and foresight be as perfect as aftersight." (*W*, XII, 110)

Emerson knows that this does not in any way cancel our debt to the past, but he suggests a pattern of historical evolution in which exactly what is not yet commensurable to history ensures the progress of history:

> "You cannot overstate our debt to the Past, but has the Present no claim? The wonderful fact is quite another, ourselves. [...] The divine gift is not the old, but the new. The divine is the instant life that receives and uses; the life that creates; and can well bury the old in the omnipotency with which it makes all things new." (*W*, XII, 109)

Harold Bloom has conceptualized this movement as one of "transumption" or of "metalepsis" (Bloom 2003: 73-74), but because he locates the responsibility for this movement firmly within the individual writer, it remains a decidedly humanist stance with him. Emerson's "divine gift" is, however, precisely not to be located in an individual. Its source is a self-sufficient "instant life that receives and uses," a "creative life" that is "unhandsome," to use Emerson's terminology, radically removed from an instrumentalizing notion of human agency. For Emerson, even tough this reinscription or refiguration of history may be effected by an individual writer, it necessarily goes beyond the calculation of an individual writer because it comes as an exposure to the rhetoricity of language. As Emerson phrases it in one of his characteristically chiastic definitions: genius, as an original force, creates and by creating, man becomes genius.

> "The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates. In this action it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. In its essence it is progressive. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they, – let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates." (*W*, I, 90)

America's future poetry / poetic future

The process that Emerson calls "broader generalization" is not a finite one. For him, this "wonderful" process is synonymous with 'America'. Lacking a

"representative" form, the name 'America' thus designates the "instant life that receives and uses; the life that creates" (*W*, XII, 108). The lack of America's representative forms, its (rhetoric, political, philosophical) eventfulness, however, is its strength as a democracy. In other words, it is precisely because America incessantly has to come up with "new statements" that it may be a democracy. Again, then, I find Emerson's description of America to be overlapping with Derrida's remarks on a *democracy à-venir*, or, more generally, on the impossibility of the presence of democracy. Derrida talks of a general incapacity of democracy to present itself (*imprésentabilité*) and argues that

> "[t]he absence of a proper form, of an eidos, of an appropriate paradigm, of a definitive turn, of a proper meaning or essence and, at the same time, the obligation to have only turns, rounds tropes, strophes of itself: that is what makes democracy unpresentable in existence. But this unpresentability responds and corresponds to the force of this democratic weakness." (Derrida 2005: 74)

To have nothing but "turns, rounds, tropes, strophes of itself," this is of course precisely what we have identified as Emerson's poetic performance and *Vollzug* of 'America' all along. And just like Derrida, Emerson identifies democracy's eventfulness as being 'instrumental' in preventing it from arriving at itself, which would mean the foreclosure of all its political aspiration in a totalitarian deadlock. If Emerson argues in "Politics" that "[e]very actual State is corrupt" (*W*, III, 208), then corruption denotes the ways in which any given form of government, necessarily is at a certain remove from fulfilling the wishes of its citizens. But it is exactly this corruption of any "actual State," the *impresentabilité* (Derrida 2005: 74) of any given instalment of a democratic politics, that is, for both Emerson and Derrida, the condition of the possibility of freedom.

Emerson's remarks on the "wonderful" process of American life – its volatility and eventfulness – show him at a decisive remove from Tocqueville's earlier anxiety about the eccentricity of American democracy. But Emerson is well aware of the dangers of America's unbounded freedom. In "Politics" he argues that "the older and more cautious among ourselves are learning from Europeans to look with some terror at our turbulent freedom. It is said that in our license of construing the Constitution, and in the despotism of public opinion, we have no anchor" (*W*, III, 211). At the same time, however, he knows that this turbulence is nothing but the condition of the possibility of freedom. "[M]onarchy," Emerson quotes Fisher Ames, "is a merchantman, which sails well, but will sometimes strike on a rock and go to the bottom" (*W*, III, 211). The "republic," on the other hand, "is a raft, which would never sink, but then your feet are always in water" (*W*, III, 211). But even if Emerson's stance *vis-à-vis* the advent of democracy is a cautious one, he clearly sees its potential as something that will be epoch-making. Other politically inclined authors of the time did not share Emerson's progressive position. They saw the disruption of history as a danger rather than as a condition

of the possibility of change. For Matthew Arnold, for example, the advent of democracy's "turbulent freedom" is a *fait accompli*, and, in the defeatist terms of conservatism, the death of a world: "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born" (Arnold 1926: 272).

For Emerson, however, it is not the politicians, that, by thoughtfully weighing their politics, guarantee this freedom. It is the poet that can offer a potential exit from a situation that has become stalled because he challenges the "rotten diction," the "paper currency" (*W*, I, 30) by creating "new and spontaneous word[s]" (*W*, II, 54). The poet thus "repairs the decay of things" and installs us as the "creators of our age" (*W*, I, 160). Emerson's famous statement that "America is a poem in our eyes" consequently has to be read in its double sense: on the one hand, it says that America is something that – before our eyes, our under observation – turns every so often, so that we continually have to adjust our perception and perspective. On the other hand, America is constituted as a poem, by way of a turning of its tropes and figures. The writer who in the succession of Emerson most radically put this poetic theory and program into poetic practice was, of course, Walt Whitman. Just like Emerson's, Whitman's America is one that remains, essentially, "unsettled," the poet symptomatically "contradicting himself" and "containing multitudes" (see Whitman 2002: 77) – contradictions and multitudes that are supposed to continually enable the (poetic) making of 'America.' And just like Emerson, Whitman conceives of America's poetic making as happening in futurity, in literatures written by what he calls the "author to come," and he also speaks of his poetry as something that is still in a state of nascency, as something that, prospectively, "will be." Like Emerson, Whitman tries to come up with a kind of writing that opens a future. And this writing comes as a challenge to accustomed ways of writing and speaking: the "Poetry of the Future," as Whitman calls it, will consist of "future poets . . . referring not to a special class, but to the entire people," the people of "the great radical Republic with its . . . loud, ill-pitch'd voice, utterly regardless whether the verb agrees with the nominative" (Whitman 1963: II, 486, 478). Proper language – spoken by the English, Whitman implies –, is a sign of injustice, whereas the 'improper,' poetic language of democracy continually subverts its own (linguistic, syntactic, etc.) rules so that it responds to a people continually changing. For Whitman and for Emerson, justice is thus signalled by poetry, by the Americans' improper use of language, the formlessness or malleability of their national rhetoric. The American practice of using words improperly or *poetically* thus forms the basis of an "autochthonous national poetry," "a national poetry which was not English but American" (Whitman 1963: II, 478, 484, 481), as Whitman insists.

Even tough Whitman saw multiple openings for such a future poetry, he saw his own application of free verse as a potential future poetry for America. "My form," he writes, "has strictly grown from my purports and facts, and is the analogy of

them." In other words: Whitman considers his use of free verse to be the "analogy" of "a revolutionary age" (Whitman, Moon, and Bradley 2002: 755). Whitman insists on a kind of Emersonian correspondence in which the form of poetic expression is made to resonate with the experience of the contemporary and, *vice versa*, the form of poetic expression itself constitutes a specific experience of the world. For Whitman – just as Emerson deeply invested in the philology and poetics of his time – it was then not the specialized discourses of government and politics, not the standardized collection of Americanisms prepared by the philologists of his time, that would bring about a new language of democracy: For Whitman, just as for Emerson, the poet is the maker, the inventor of words and of language, so much even that he is no longer bound by its very history. English, according to Whitman, "is not a polished fossil-language," he argues against other philologists who do not believe that there will be a uniquely American idiom. For him, it is "but a broad fluid language of democracy" (see Hollis 1957: 419). Consequently, for Whitman too, the poet is the epoch-maker, he, by means of his words, connects the past to the present and "realizes" the future:

> "Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet [...] he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson [...] he places himself where the future becomes present. The greatest poet does not only dazzle his rays over character and scenes and passions [...] he finally ascends and finishes all [...] he exhibits the pinnacles that no man can tell what they are for or what is beyond [...] he glows a moment on the extremest verge." (Whitman, Moon, and Bradley 2002: 623)

Not unlike Emerson, Whitman insists on a strong connection between America's language and its polity. And he also connects the problem of America's epoch to that of its language. Whitman thinks that it is the poet's responsibility to "keep language open, flexible, and responsive to the changing contours of American democratic experience", as Betsy Erkkila has argued (Erkkila 1989: 84). And just as Whitman is still waiting for the American era to begin, he also sees the language of American democracy as something that has yet to be realized.

The poets will bring this American idiom or language about not by an act of discovery (as etymologists of the time argued), but by an act of invention. The poet-genius, both for Emerson and his follower Whitman, invents the new language. But because the true poet, especially for Whitman, is the American people, this poetry has to be multivocal so as to be able to picture the language games of a new America. This for Whitman also means the inclusion of "hundreds of outré words" (Whitman and Traubel 1904: 2) used by slaves. He thinks that what he calls "nigger dialect" (Whitman and Traubel 1904: 24) will be of greatest significance to the future of American English. The accents of African-Americans for Whitman have "hints of the future theory of the modification of all words of the English language, for musical purposes, for a native grand opera in America"

(Whitman 1904: II, 24). The future that Whitman imagines, is more than Emerson's, one that leaves the genealogy of the founding fathers: In order for the future to take place, Whitman argues, the language of women, slaves and opera needs to replace an instrumentalised political liturgy that, even in America, has become a pale cast. Whitman even envisions a differently gendered future: "Sometimes I have fancied that only from superior, hardy women can rise the future superiorities of These States" (Whitman 1904: 13). But for Whitman, the future of the United States is not a new nationalism, but rather, as he argues, a "language experiment" that will be investigating "new potentialities of speech" (Whitman 1978: III, 729n.).

This is why for Whitman the advent of true art and poetry is inevitably coupled with the advent of a republican or democratic politics. In the *American Primer*, which he originally addressed to "American Young, Men, and Women, for Literats, Orators, Teachers, Musicians, Judges, Presidents, &c.," Whitman wants Americans to "throw off" the sovereign rule of standard English in favour of a language that is created to correspond to the "new occasions, new facts, new politics, new combinations" (Whitman 1978: III, 734) of contemporary America. And in another passage in his notebooks, Whitman expresses a strong belief that America can be founded again, only that this time around, the foundation will be achieved in language:

> "I have heard it said that when the spirit arises that does not brook submission and imitation, it will throw off the ultramarine names. – That spirit already walks the streets of the cities of These States – I, and others, illustrate it. I say America too shall be commemorated – and shall stand rooted in the ground in names – […]." (Whitman 1978: III, 755)

But the advent of the unprecedented form of polity in republicanism, Whitman argues, has not yet been complemented by similarly unprecedented linguistic forms. But he insists that they will be created, even if he argues in "In "Poetry To-Day in America – Shakespeare – The Future" that not even the greatest poets (Shakespeare, Milton) can prepare us for the poets and the poetry of democracy:

> "Republicanism advances over the whole world. Liberty, with Law by her side, will one day be paramount – will at any rate be the central idea. Then only – for all the splendor and beauty of what has been, or the polish of what is – then only will the true poets appear, and the true poems. Not the satin and patchouly of to-day, not the glorification of the butcheries and wars of the past, nor any fight between Diety on one side and somebody else on the other – not Milton, not even Shakspere's plays, grand as they are. Entirely different and hitherto unknown classes of men, being authoritatively called for in imaginative literature, will certainly appear. What is hitherto most lacking, perhaps most absolutely indicates the future. Democracy has been hurried on through time by measureless tides and winds, resistless as the revolution of the globe, and as far-reaching and rapid. But in the highest walks of art it has not yet had a single representative worthy of it anywhere upon the earth." (Whitman 1963: II, 483)

The "measureless tides and winds" characteristic of democratic politics still await their adequate poetic expression, and, consequently, a specifically "American"

literature still needs to be written in the future. Rephrasing Emerson's "America is a poem in our eyes," Whitman insists that "[t]he Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States is essentially the greatest poem" (Whitman 2002: 616). But Whitman, too, is careful not to see his poetry as the fulfilment of what he proposes as a poetic programme for America. In the poem "Poets to Come", he states that "I myself but write one or two words for the future, / I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness" and concludes that he is "[e]xpecting the main things from you," that is, the "poets to come" (Whitman 1961: VII, 14).

It is important to note here that both Emerson and Whitman do not conceive of a democratic literature as a mere addendum to the republicanised politics of the United States. Art and poetry for them are not a simply an external means expressing the inherent qualities of democracy: The advent of democracy and the advent of a democratic literature are interdependent, one cannot happen without the other, linguistic change results in political change and *vice versa*. Their insistence on the urgency of the advent of a specifically "American" or democratic literature thus means that they both conceive of America's democracy as yet unfinished, postponed to the future. The mutual implication of poetry and politics expressed in the phrases "America is a poem in our eyes" (Emerson) and "The United States is essentially the greatest poem" (Whitman) are consequently not casual remarks: they locate a matter of poetics right at the very heart of America's political constitution. Therefore we find here, *avant la lettre*, a formulation of Derrida's consideration that democracy is *nothing but* its transition of tropes and figures. If Emerson and Whitman seem to praise a kind of heroic poet, singing himself, then we always need to remember that the poet is precisely the figure that is most attuned to or has abandoned himself to language's poetic processes of transition and of troping. The poet is thus a central figure not by virtue of merely expressing 'representatively' the experience of democracy, but rather by virtue of being a conduit for the contingency of both language's and democracy's transitionality and figurality.

As we have seen in previous chapters, this kind of incalculable transition can also be found in what Emerson terms "nature". As he states in a late lecture delivered at Harvard University in 1870:

> "The moment there is fixation, putrifaction and death come. The very word Nature makes us to know this. "Natura" – becoming, about to be born. We are immortal by the force of transits. The law of the world is transition and our power lies in that." (*LL*, II, 43)

In an earlier but similar passage, Emerson identifies "nature" with the "becoming" of the world in general. This becoming, as he remarks in an aside, pertains to futurity, as already the Latin root of the word suggests:

> "It is singular that our rich English language should have no word to denote the face of the world. Kinde was the old English term, which, however, filled only half the range of our fine Latin word, with its delicate future tense, - natura, about to be born, or what German philosophy denotes as a becoming. (*W*, VII, 171)

But for the Emerson of "The Poet", nature is just one term denoting the contingency principle at work not only in nature, but also in poetry, thought, etc. In a long paragraph he explains this analogy or, rather, identity of nature and poetry:

> "Genius is the activity which repairs the decays of things, whether wholly or partly of a material and finite kind. Nature, through all her kingdoms, insures herself. Nobody cares for planting the poor fungus: so she shakes down from the gills of one agaric countless spores, any one of which, being preserved, transmits new billions of spores tomorrow or next day. The new agaric of this hour has a chance which the old one had not. This atom of seed is thrown into a new place, not subject to the accidents which destroyed its parent two rods off. She makes a man; and having brought him to ripe age, she will no longer run the risk of losing this wonder at a blow, but she detaches from him a new self, that the kind may be safe from accidents to which the individual is exposed. So when the soul of the poet has come to ripeness of thought, she detaches and sends away from it its poems or songs, – a fearless, sleepless, deathless progeny, which is not exposed to the accidents of the weary kingdom of time; a fearless, vivacious offspring, clad with wings (such was the virtue of the soul out of which they came), which carry them fast and far, and infix them irrecoverably into the hearts of men. These wings are the beauty of the poet's soul. The songs, thus flying immortal from their mortal parent, are pursued by clamorous flights of censures, which swarm in far greater numbers, and threaten to devour them; but these last are not winged. At the end of a very short leap they fall plump down, and rot, having received from the souls out of which they came no beautiful wings. But the melodies of the poet ascend, and leap, and pierce into the deeps of infinite time." (*W*, III, 22-3)

I am quoting the passage from "The Poet" in its full length here because I want to draw attention to Emerson's characteristic procedure, that is, how the passage performs what it describes. On the one hand, Emerson describes the cycle of nature as one of simultaneous germination and decay. This cycle is unpredictable, that is, it includes a moment of "chance" that fundamentally and irretrievably changes the conditions for each individual process of germination and decay. On the other hand, Emerson defines the process of thought in analogous terms: the production of new thoughts includes a moment of poetry, a minimal but irreversible "sending," "detachment," or "leap" from the known configuration of thought, a sending that both crosses as well as subverts that which it springs from. But it is only on a third level of rhetoric performance, or *Vollzug* that we find the imprint of Emerson's characteristic procedure: The processes of nature and thought are not only analogous in terms of the argumentative structure of the passage. Rather, Emerson transfers elements of the description of the process of nature metaphorically onto his description of poetry, so that the writing of poems is the "ripening of thought," and so that the censures, embodying the hold of tradition, "fall plump down, and rot." In the rhetoric transition from nature to poetry, nature

comes to describe the process of poetry and the other way round; the transmission of new billions of spores" is like the "fearless, vivacious offspring" of the soul in poetry. In other words: Rhetoric presentation with its metaphorical shifts here is not simply a matter of expression, it is itself part of the definition of nature and poetry.

Following up this chiastic description of nature and poetry or thought, the essay "The poet" goes on to postulate the poetic principle of "metamorphosis" as the general process characteristic of both nature and poetry:

> "But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other. This expression, or naming, is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree. What we call nature, is a certain self-regulated motion, or change; and Nature does all things by her own hands, and does not leave another to baptize her, but baptizes herself; and this through the metamorphosis again." (*W*, III, 22)

Nature and our acts of poetic naming are consequently both characterized by a poetic kind of contingency, by a "self-regulated motion," "change," or "metamorphosis," that in Emerson's terms are synonymous with the eventful and unforeseeable process of transition. And Emerson argues that this poetic power of language does not merely apply to the poets. Its metamorphosis is also our metamorphosis, since Emerson suggests that the poetic text makes possible an experience that is not merely textual but real.

> "If the imagination intoxicates the poet, it is not inactive in other men. The metamorphosis excites in the beholder an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men. We seem to be touched by a wand, which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of tropes, fables, oracles, and all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop." (*W*, III, 30)

Poetry is thus reconceived as a merit not merely restricted to linguistic modes of expression: "tropes, fables, oracles, and all poetic forms" have an "effect" on us. And if Emerson argues that "[t]he poets are thus liberating gods", then this is not simply the affirmation of a radical kind of individualism because the poets paradoxically liberate by wilfully abandoning themselves to language. It is precisely this abandonment to the rhetoricity of language that, for Emerson, licences a kind of freedom, a "stimulation" by and through tropes that is "transcendental" and "extraordinary" because it allows us to be "carried away" from known configurations of thought.

> "The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, 'Those who are free throughout the world.' They are free, and they make free. An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward when we arrive at the precise sense of the author. I think nothing is of any value in books excepting the transcendental and extraordinary. If a man is inflamed and carried away

> by his thought, to that degree that he forgets the authors and the public, and heeds only this one dream, which holds him like an insanity, let me read his paper, and you may have all the arguments and histories and criticism." (*W*, III, 32)

And again, this "departure from routine" (*W*, III, 23) made possible by the rhetoricity of language in Emerson is always more than a praise of poetic forms: it is *realitätshaltig*, material, because it "puts the world like a ball in our hands" (W, III, 32) and "nations, times, systems, enter and disappear like threads in tapestry of large figure and many colors" (*W*, III, 33). If poetry sometimes borders on "insanity", the "emancipation" (*W*, III, 33) it suggests can also be epoch-making: "Therefore we love the poet, the inventor [...] . He unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene" (*W*, III, 33). For someone deeply steeped in the political liturgy and oratory of his time, this is a radical departure: It is no longer the eloquent politician so formidably epitomized by America's founding fathers, but America's poets that make possible the advent of the new epoch, that by their implication in the rhetoricity of language bring about a more fundamental *epoché* that is not a matter of political speech, doctrine or planning.

It is important to maintain here that Emerson's focus on transition and rhetorics is not a mysticism, as he himself maintains:

> "But the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze. The poet did not stop at the colour, or the form, but read their meaning, neither may he rest in this meaning, but he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought. Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead. Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one." (*W*, II, 34)

In other words: all symbols are necessarily "accidental and individual," our use of them underlies what linguists will later call the principle of arbitrariness. Again then, we find here Emerson's praise of language's potential for "conveyance" or "unsettledness" and it is in this potential that Emerson locates the promise of America's new epoch, of America's change. What he calls "metamorphosis" consequently is not only the basis of his poetological but also of his political thought. It draws attention to how language's tropological movement, its rhetoricity, enables a continual *epoché* that is tantamount to political change. 'America' is thus reconceived as an aesthetic project against a dangerous "love of repose" (*W*, II, 22): by engaging in a sort of radical doubt, by suspending linguistic or political common sense, it opens a "cleft" or "verge" for *poiesis*, so that the transition to something new presents itself as a movement or recirculation of meaning. Both the poet and the orator, because of their special proclivity or responsiveness to language, hold the key to this production of a coming sense generated by "fluxional symbols".

Emerson thinks that the American orator is especially sensitive to such a future, to such a coming of sense. As he says in "Eloquence": "The orator must ever stand with forward foot, in the attitude of advancing. His speech must be just ahead of the assembly, ahead of the whole human race, or it is superfluous" (*W*, VIII, 115). Elsewhere, he goes a step further to suggest that the orator must also be ahead of himself: "We aim above the mark to hit the mark" (*W*, III, 185). Emerson's writing thus stands in a long tradition of an American poetics that sees itself as what Charles Olson has described as a "figure of forward" (Olson 1997: 96). And just as Whitman's poet, Emerson's, too, is still a messianic figure that has not appeared on the American scene yet, as he argues in "The Poet":

> "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chant our own times and social circumstance. If we filled the day with bravery, we should not shrink from celebrating it. Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await." (*W*, III, 37)

This striving towards new forms of poetic expression, towards a new role for the poet in American society, for Emerson is tantamount to achieving his country. There is, thus, a characteristic overlap in his writing between his attempts at defining or locating a specifically American cultural or political disposition and his aspiration to find new poetic means to express them: Both goals are vanishing points rather than concrete political or aesthetic aims and they acquire their significance precisely because they cannot be achieved. Emerson insists, however, that even if we can never finally achieve our country, it is necessary that we start, here and now, to "address ourselves to life" and to "chant our own times and social circumstance".

"Endowed with such a life": expecting America's next age

Again, I am led back to Jacques Derrida's interest in the form of democracy as a polity that can never be fully achieved. Derrida insists that because democracy does not have an identifiable form, it will never exist as such. But he argues that it is precisely because democracy can never exist that we must continue to strive towards it. As he declares in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*:

> "*If* [*si*] democracy does not exist and *if* [*si*] it is true that, amorphous or polymorphous, it never will exist, is it not necessary to continue, and with all one's heart, to force oneself to achieve it? Well, *yes* [*si*], it is necessary; one must, one ought, one cannot not strive toward it with all one's force." (Derrida 2005: 74)

And just as Emerson asks fellow Americans to address their own contemporary moment, Derrida believes that a striving towards democracy must happen in the *here and now* because it is precisely a mode of our being-in-the-world. In other

words: both Emerson and Derrida, even if they think that America or the political form of democracy may never be achieved, maintain a strong sense of urgency that asks us to attend to our "to-day," our own contemporary moment. As Derrida says: "The to-come of democracy is also, although without presence, the hic et nunc of urgency, of the injunction as absolute urgency" (Derrida 2005: 73).

Derrida argues that democracy always comes at the price of a loss of sovereignty, that is, at the same time, also a loss of tradition. The expectation of democracy's freedom is necessarily linked to a loss of established genealogies, traditions, because it cannot be deduced from the past but must be effected by an orientation towards "the experience that lets itself be affected by what or who comes [*(ce) qui vient*], by what happens by or by who happens by, by *the other to come*, a certain unconditional renunciation of sovereignty is required a priori" (Derrida 2005: xiv). This renunciation of tradition or sovereignty in Derrida is comparable to what Emerson describes as "abandonment" because it implies that the coming refiguration of the political scene will only happen if it is approached unconditionally: it is not the result of our willing, but, rather, of our willingness to accept a certain "force" or "power" (Emerson's terms) that is beyond our control. As Derrida phrases it:

> "Such a distribution or sharing also presupposes that we think at once the unforeseeability of an event that is necessarily without horizon, the singular coming of the other, and, as a result, a weak force. This vulnerable force, this force without power, opens up unconditionally to what or who comes and comes to affect it." (Derrida 2005: xiv)

Derrida conceives of this "vulnerable force" as "an act of messianic faith – irreligious and without messianism" (Derrida 2005: xiv). In Derrida's account, democracy thus finds its place in what he describes as "another *place* without age, another 'taking-place,' the irreplaceable place or placement of a 'desert in the desert,'" that is also "a spacing from 'before' the world, […] from 'before' […] any anthropotheological dogmatism or historicity" (Derrida 2005: xiv). This place of democracy, even if it is an impossible one, would allow political change to take place, "without, however, providing any ground or foundation" (Derrida 2005: xiv). Derrida calls this impossible place or scene a *khora*: "Khora would make or give place; it would give rise – without ever giving anything – to what is called the coming of the event" (Derrida 2005: xiv). Derrida then continues to argue that such a tentatively phrased theory of democracy may not amount to a political programme – and he has often been attacked precisely for not providing one –, but that it may well enable a certain expectation for a coming political event or the advent of democracy:

> "No politics, no ethics, an no law can be, as it were, *deduced* from this thought. To be sure, nothing can be *done* [*faire*] with it. But should we then conclude that this thought leaves no trace on what is to be done – for example in the politics, the ethics, or the law to come. On it, perhaps, on what here receives the name *khora*, a call might thus

> be taken up and take hold: the call for a thinking of the event to *come*, of the democracy to *come*, of the reason to *come*" (Derrida 2005: xiv).

I am not simply referring to Derrida's comments on a *democratie à-venir* because it is a fitting theoretical backdrop for my explication of some of the problems of Emerson's description of an America on "the verge of to-day." I want to suggest, rather, that there may be a much stronger connection between nineteenth century American political thought and the notion of a *démocratie à-venir*. Derrida himself states in *Rogues* that his study is meant to serve as an investigation of the curious "volt" between the concept of democracy and America: "[A]t the end of a long detour, right near the end, it will perhaps become clear that democracy *in* America or, more precisely, democracy *and* America will have been my theme" (Derrida 2005: 14). Derrida's essay is in fact itself a working out of some of the problems of a theory of democracy that present themselves in Tocqueville's classic account of *Democracy in America* (see Derrida 2005: 13-15). Again then, we are confronted with a circuitous and temporally perplexing instance of a trans-atlantic exchange in which a European philosopher that travels across the Atlantic to study the political system in America turns out to be read by a European philosopher that claims that his study will have been about (the future of democracy in) America. More importantly, however, Derrida's study engages in a complex sending or circular structure that also lies at the very heart of the American cultural constitution. In other words: the circular structure or identification of America *and* democracy, the ways in which they serve as each other's origin, is not only a theme in Tocqueville, Emerson, and Derrida, it is the very conundrum of the political form of democracy *and* of America.

Derrida's study aims to deconstruct "the circular identification of cause and end" that he sees at work in the first explication of American democracy in Tocqueville. He argues that Tocqueville's account effectively identifies the form of democracy with popular sovereignty and thus arrests all the forces that could serve as democracy's "driving cause" (Derrida 2005: 13). Tocqueville, Derrida argues, "presents this circularity as the effective fulfilment of a democracy that, up until then, had been presented only as a project, an opinion, a claim or allegation, a deferral to later, a utopia, indeed the fiction of a democracy to come" (Derrida 2005: 13). Derrida quotes the following passage from *Democracy in America* to support his point:

> "In our own day, the principle of popular sovereignty has been elaborated in practice in every conceivable way. It has disentangled itself from the many fictions with which it has elsewhere been carefully been wreathed. It adapts its form to the necessities of each particular case." (*DiA*, 64)

I think Derrida is right in pointing out that Tocqueville's account of democracy – lacking an internal division, an internal antagon that would enable democracy's next *trope, turn*, or *refiguration* – forecloses democracy's potential because it

prevents new articulations of democracy, of freedom, etc. And indeed, Tocqueville posits the sovereignty of the people as a new God, it is "the cause and end of all things" and "everything proceeds from them, and to them everything returns" (*DiA*, 65). As we have seen, Derrida precisely attempts to speak about a space, spacing, or interval that interrupts the circularity of the identification of the sovereignty of the people and democracy.

However, I think that Derrida glosses over a persistent concern in Tocqueville that is especially relevant to what I have been saying about Emerson's explication of an America on "the verge of to-day." There is a contradictory tendency in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* that itself deconstructs what Derrida identifies as a rather straightforward identification of the American people and their political system. For Tocqueville too, America suggests a political future that has not yet been achieved, that is uncertain and unsecured. This is precisely what Tocqueville elaborates in Chapter XVIII of his study when he talks about the "Future of the Three Tribes in America":

> "It is difficult though not impossible for the human mind to circumscribe the future within certain broad limits, but beyond those limits chance plays havoc with all prediction. In our picture of the future, chance always leaves a zone of darkness, which the eye of intelligence cannot penetrate." (*DiA*, 412-13)

Tocqueville thus acknowledges a certain problematics inherent in his analysis of American democracy: his aim is to depict the current state of the American nation, to predict how it will evolve and thus to gauge whether it is a valuable alternative to the aristocracies of the old continent. And Tocqueville, the elitist aristocratic observer, is skeptical of the promises of democracy because he is precisely unable to deduce America's future state from the present moment he witnesses. In the new world, the ability of the aristocratic regimes to regulate and govern change has been nullified. There is then, especially towards the end of the first and in the second book of *Democracy in America*, a strong anxiety that the promise of the new political system cannot finally be assessed because its evolution is, as yet, unforeseeable:

> "This is what the present reveals. What will the final result of this tendency be? What events may halt, slow, or hasten the movement I have described? These remain hidden in the future, whose veil I do not pretend to be able to lift." (*DiA*, 455)

More and more, Tocqueville amasses facts on his journey through America that do no longer add up to a coherent picture of American democracy. The diverse forms of democracy in the present moment cannot be reduced to a common denominator or a discernible tendency. This becomes obvious already in Chapter Four where Tocqueville attempts to 'calculate' the "Principal Causes that Tend to Maintain the Democratic Republic in the United States" and has to concede that there are "accidental" (*DiA*, 318) causes that he cannot factor into his estimation of America's future. When confronted, for example, with the phenomenon of a

rapidly increasing migration to the vast lands of the West, Tocqueville is unable to integrate this demographic development into his documentary account and simply concedes: "[t]he ultimate consequences of this migration of Americans toward the west still lie hidden in the future" (*DiA*, 324). Finally, the eloquent political analyst – who starts out by trying to establish a plan by which to improve democracy – is at a loss to account for the unforeseeable, ungovernable potentiality of the future in democracy.

There is then, in this early attempt to come to terms with the American democracy, a curious sense that Tocqueville's project fails. But it fails precisely because it acknowledges a characteristic quality of democracy that precisely cannot be made commensurate with Tocqueville's documentary project. There is, in democracy, a potential for change that results from but can never be simply reduced to the present "knot of affairs" (*W*, VIII, 31), as Emerson phrases it. And this is why, strictly speaking, democracy always remains yet to be achieved.

Today, we may have lost the context of a specifically Puritan vision or cultural temporality that explained – even to Americans in the nineteenth century – this promise of a future democracy. But the connection of Puritan doctrine or ideology and the national political awakening would still have been very strong in the first half of the nineteenth century. Puritan doctrine, as Sacvan Bercovitch has shown in *The American Jeremiad*, underwrote an "ideological consensus" (Bercovitch 1978: 176) that suggested a peculiar cultural temporality that was, simultaneously, "endless and self-enclosed" (Bercovitch 1978: 178): Any cultural possibility in the present moment of American culture invited a host of other possibilities to be potentially fulfilled in the future, but the possibilities actualized in the future will always be part of what is called 'America'. This is why America, as a cultural entity, will only be revealed in the future and in contrast to the present (see Bercovitch 1978: 176-178).

In *White-Jacket*, Herman Melville exemplifies this peculiar cultural and temporal logic when he explains that for Americans, as the "pioneers of the world," the future holds a special significance:

> "The world has arrived at a period which renders it the part of Wisdom to pay homage to the prospective precedents of the Future in preference to those of the Past. The Past is dead, and has no resurrection; but the Future is endowed with such a life, that it lives to us even in anticipation. The Past is, in many things, the foe of mankind; the Future is, in all things, our friend. In the Past is no hope; the Future is the Bible of the Free. […] [Thus] in many things we Americans are driven to a rejection of the maxims of the Past, seeing that, ere long, the van of the nations must, of right, belong to ourselves […]. Escaped from the house of bondage, Israel of old did not follow after the Egyptians; to her were given new things under the sun. And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. […] God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. […] We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World

> that is ours. [...] Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us, if we would but give utterance to his promptings." (Melville and Tanselle 1983: 505-6)

For Americans in the nineteenth century, Melville's amalgamation of the nation's religious eschatology with its political promise would have been a familiar figure. Melville here uses the familiar theme of America as the "Israel of our time" to suggest a radically secularized version of the biblical myth in which the promise of the future can no longer be simply awaited, but needs to be asserted in the here and now, in the concrete materialities of American life in the present moment ("he has come in us"). "God's predestination," however, even in Melville's forceful optimism, is still a future that is not secured and cannot simply be awaited: it is only if Americans aim to fulfil mankind's expectation in the present cultural moment that America's promise continues to be real.

This curious bending back of cultural time, of cultural expectations into the moment of a lived present – the crucial attribute of the cultural and temporal logic exemplified by the jeremiad in America, as Sacvan Bercovitch has pointed out (Bercovitch 1978) –, is also what we deemed to be characteristic of a *democratie à-venir*. In other words, American culture seems to be especially prepared for the promise of a future that needs to be addressed in the "to-day". The system of typology and its expression in the jeremiad as well as the ideology of *manifest destiny* are all components of this cultural logic that calls on Americans to attend to their cultural moment in order to keep the promise of the future alive.

Simple and terrible laws

Compared to Melville's boisterous confidence in *White-Jacket*, Emerson seems to be much more careful in specifying America's expectation or promise. This is because his vision of history is not that of a progressive improvement, is not that of a kind of Hegelian spiral that slowly progresses towards an enlightened secularism. For him, the very existence o man implies his fall. As he notes in "Experience": "It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man" (W, III, 75). This fall of man for Emerson signifies that even in our boldest beginnings, we have already again fallen and, thus, our expectation is postponed, deferred. We thus find in Emerson a curious temporal structure, a kind of original posteriority, a "postponed expectation" (W, I, 81), in which America's promise is constantly postponed precisely when it is being addressed. Thus for Emerson, America's democracy is and has to remain an emergent form, one whose arrival needs to be continually deferred so that its potential is not foreclosed. As we have seen already, the place of this original posteriority in Emerson is "nature" as that which is "about to be

born, or what German philosophy denotes as a becoming" (*LL*, II, 43). But nature, as a kind of *genius loci*, as the place of a tropic or figural originality, is always already interwoven with human uses of language. Both language and nature are texts, texts that continually inflect each other to form the reality in which we live.

In "The Conduct of Life", Emerson describes nature as a book. But it is yet a book unwritten, a "rude form" that blocks "her future statue, concealing under these unwieldy monsters the fine type of her coming king" (*W*, VI, 15). "The population of the world," Emerson continues, "is a conditional population; not the best, but the best that could live now" (*W*, VI, 16). Other than some of his contemporaries, then, Emerson circumvents the identification or specification of America's future. For him, the coming of the future still depends upon our acknowledgment of the present's potential for self-difference. And this potential, necessarily, is risky and unforeseeable, offering both a vision of magnificence as well as of potential decadence. The promise of the future then always needs to come as an unspecified optative and not, say, in the form of the conventional figures of providentialism. This obviously is a decisive break from many of his contemporaries, who were convinced that America had reached the end of history and marked a point where "nations culminate" (*J*, VIII, 345). Emerson's contemporary Orestes Brownson, to provide an example, was sure that America had arrived at a "vantage ground to which no people have ever ascended before," and that the "cause which landed our fathers on Plymouth Rock" had been effectively fulfilled: "Verily it is near. […] Humanity awaits the hour of its renewal" (qtd. in Hochfield 1966: 93, 175-76, 252-253).

In Emerson, the coming of the future is again implied in or displaced into a process of poetics. America too is a "symbol" that, as Emerson states in "The Poet", is "fluxational" or "vehicular and transitive" (*W*, III, 34). It owes its existence and its "transfigurations" (*W*, III, 14) to nature as the original locus of figuration. America is thus, as Riddel argues, paradoxically "a mis-transcription of its origin," a translation "of the pure poem that nevertheless cannot properly precede it" (Riddel 1995: 51). This explains why Emerson thinks that his "country is an excessive pretension" (*W*, I, 186). In fact, in order to live up to its promise, it must be nothing but a series of pretensions. Hence Emerson's advice: "Neither dogmatize, or accept another's dogmatism" (*W*, I, 186). America's advent as the culmination of nations is thus guaranteed as well as complicated by the "primal warblings" (*W*, III, 8) of poetry. And it is poetry that suggests how America, as an emerging democracy, does no longer correspond to the standard narrative of the history of nations. In "Circles," Emerson argues that the power of poetry goes beyond our will to form our cultures:

> "Every ultimate fact is only the first in a new series. […] There is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference to us. […] The result of to-day, which haunts the mind and cannot be escaped, will presently be abridged into a word, and the principle that seemed to explain nature, will itself be included as one example of a bolder

> generalization. In the thought of to-morrow there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures, of the nations, and marshal thee to a Heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted. Every man is not so much a workman in the world, as he is a suggestion of that he should be. Men walk as prophecies of the next age." (*W*, II, 304-305)

Even in America, I take Emerson to say, we are not the sovereign legitimators of our fate. What we think is an "ultimate fact," is in fact only the starting point for a series of refigurations. This process by which we are transformed is without limits, without a safeguard, because we can never establish our individual and communal identities once and for all. These too, as Emerson argues, are "haunted" by the materialities of our ordinary lives in the contemporary moment that feed back into what we are. Potentially, the refiguration that happens in the vanishing moment of the today – between what we were and what we will be tomorrow – is so radical that we cannot account for it. We thus "walk as prophecies" because even if we want to form our future, we cannot predetermine it.

Because our future potentially comes as an "upheaval," the progress of nations is a mysterious one and can only be described as the emergence of a "power" and not in terms of a dialectic. As Emerson insists in "Experience": "Life is not dialectics" and we "have had lessons enough of the futility of criticism" (*W*, III, 58). In each evolutionary step, we potentially face a radical rupture or de-basement of the narratives that we use to account for our situation:

> "Step by step we scale this mysterious ladder: the steps are actions; the new prospect is power. Every several result is threatened and judged by that which follows. Every one seems to be contradicted by the new; it is only limited by the new. The new statement is always hated by the old, and, to those dwelling in the old, comes like an abyss of scepticism." (*W*, II, 305)

I want to draw attention to how Emerson complicates the standard dialectic argument: the "new statement" here is not merely a sublation of the elements that go into it. Rather, there is a fundamental contradiction between the new and what went before it so that the new necessarily comes as a complete repudiation of the old. Everything that we may have known "pales and dwindles before the revelation of the new hour" (*W*, II, 306). While the dialectic supposes that we can account for historical progress, Emerson in "Circles" exhibits the moment of change as the moment of a singular emergence, as the moment of an event that cannot be integrated into a dialectic argument or narrative. And the unforeseeability of this event applies both to the progress of American democracy as well as to what Emerson calls the "perfection" of the individual: "There are no fixtures to men, if we appeal to consciousness," he says in "Circles," "[t]he last chamber, the last closet, he must feel was never opened; there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable. That is, every man believes that he has a greater possibility" (*W*, II, 306). Or, in epochal terms, this is why "a new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits" (*W*, II, 309).

The politics of American democracy for Emerson thus has the contours of an ethics that asks us to acknowledge political or historical change as a singular event that we cannot control or instrumentalise, even tough we must be ready to receive it. As he phrases it in a passage in his journal: "There must be a revolution. Let the revolution come" (*J*, IV, 414). Paradoxically then, the revolution will not come by itself if we are not willing to accept it. But its coming itself cannot be predicted, because it comes as a "growth" or as a "movement" that itself is "incalculable" (*W*, II, 320). In other words: it comes as an unpredictable turning or refiguration of what we are.

Emerson's theory of historical progress, of the *emergence* of the age American democracy thus presupposes a present that is not self-identical, that is not present with itself. And, if we follow a remark made by Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx*, the moment of democracy's emergence is necessarily "out of joint," because it presupposes the supplementary effect of a present that is "too much," beyond measure (Derrida 1994: 43). Emerson obviously lacks the terminology to further specify such a supplementarity, but he conceives of a number of forces – "fate," "nature," "life," "love," etc. – that cancel our intentional acts but are nevertheless the condition of possibility for change. In "The Over-Soul" Emerson points out how change must therefore always be imminent, it can happen the very next moment and only if we are willing to receive may we fulfil the "extraordinary hopes of man" (*W*, II, 267):

> "The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. In its experiments there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve. Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. The most exact calculator has no prescience that somewhat incalculable may not balk the very next moment. I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine." (*W*, II, 267-268)

This is obviously a far cry from the doctrine of providence, even tough some of its rhetorical impetus subsist here. In Emerson's reformulation of the doctrine, providence does precisely not come as the slow but foreseeable fulfilment of a certain prediction, but as the certainty of an unforeseeable, eventful change. As he states it again in "Fate": "Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student in divinity" (*W*, VI, 8). Emerson conceives of providence as continually rerouted by the irreducible materialities of the present moment, by the "cataclysms" of "every day" and by the "disasters which threaten mankind" (*W*, VI, 8). But these "shocks and ruins" of the today are "less destructive" than our attempts at organizing or instrumentalising our fate. As Emerson remarks laconically: "Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards, the house confines the spirit" (*W*, VI, 8).

The greatest danger for the American freedom is thus limitation, stagnation, or the sedimentation of cultural forms. Even tough they may be unavoidable, Emerson calls on Americans to live up to the promise of American freedom by precisely acknowledging those forces that cannot be instrumentalised and that do not yet suggest a pattern of cultural change. And this is also how he conceives of his own role as a writer when he describes his aim as one of "contagion, yeast, 'emptins,' anything to convey fermentation, import fermentation, induce fermentation into a quiescent mass" (*J*, VI, 346). And it seems especially relevant to him in a time that he describes as the "age of tools" (*W*, VII, 157), that is, an age that conceives of society as a "machine" (*W*, I, 318) whose change can be mechanically or strategically governed. Against a political consensus in America that social and cultural evolution can be engineered and instrumentalised, Emerson proposes the antagonistic action of a principle he repeatedly calls "friction" (*W*, I, 319; *W*, VI, 79): "friction" denotes the ways in which our attempts at structuring our lives are countered by a contingent moment of the unplannable. It stands for the unforeseeable, ungovernable interaction of thought and action, of nature and man. "By how much we know, so much we are," (W, 12: 10), Emerson states in "Powers and Laws of Thought," but he is well aware that the relation of knowledge and being forms an antagonism, a reaction in which our material being qualifies what we think and *vice versa*. Hence, the "stupendous peculiarity" (*W*, XII, 10) of our knowledge. As Michael Lopez points out in *Emerson and Power*: "Our knowledge, our identity, must be 'corrected' and 'perpetually reinforced' by a life and experience that are *rough* – that push back" (Lopez 1996: 43). John Dewey, in what was the first philosophical appreciation or re-evaluation of Emerson's writing early in the twentieth century, describes this corrective and anti-instrumental principle of "friction" as central to the thought of Emerson: "Intelligence," as Dewey argues, "must throw its fund out again into the stress of life; it must venture its savings against the pressure of facts" (Dewey 1967: 152).

Again, this is very much what Harold Bloom is after when he identifies a spirit of metalepsis or transumption in American poetry (Bloom 1977:13). But with Bloom, this remains an idealist narrative, a vision of the individual that, because he has a privileged access to language, is an accomplished troper and so heals the world. Blooms vision thus implies a dialectic, a progression of stages in which the poet and his abilities effect and secure the successful sublation. Blooms reading of Emerson's theory of imagination – in his study on the poetry of Wallace Stevens – suggests that the individual may finally overcome the difficulty of the word to find the word as medium of self-reflection and self-grounding. Bloom points out that this is the specifically American "inspiration" of a figural re-centering:

> "I think Nietzsche particularly understood that Emerson had come to prophesy not a de-centering, as Nietzsche had, [...] but a peculiarly American re-centering, and with it an American mode of interpretation [...]; a mode that is intra-textual, but that stubbornly

remains logocentric, and that still follows Emerson in valorizing eloquence, the inspired voice, over the scene of writing." (Bloom 2003: 176).

I want to argue however that in Emerson the dialectic that Bloom proposes outruns its own grammar because what Emerson calls the poet's "abandonment" to language implies an elementary risk: here, the re-centering that Bloom envisions is thrown off course by the principle of "friction," of a figural contingency, of difference, or, quite simply, poetry.

In Emerson, things precisely "do not return into themselves" (*J*, VII, 20), because they are the result of a singular emergence that is irreversible and cannot be reconstructed. This moment properly of difference also makes clear that when Emerson talks of the "Lords of Life" in "Experience," he conceives of them as merely "threads on the loom of time" (*W*, III, 83), "fragments" whose larger pattern cannot be discerned so that he "knows better than to claim any completeness for my picture" (*W*, III, 83). The "Lords of Life" consequently, expose the internal limit and antagonism of historicity that must be constantly 'approached' or "approximated" (Emerson's term) if history is to be continued to be written.[10] But this confrontation with history's *other* cannot be reduced to the workings of a dialectic, it precisely foregoes the *telos* of a Hegelian history. In Emerson's 'theory' of historical progress, there is no such transumption, no quasi-theological teleology, and indeed, as we have already seen, America comes into being precisely as a criticism or reversal of such a concept of history. And it is as a reversal of a Hegelian notion of progress that 'America' becomes the place of a new democratic politics or, as Anselm Haverkamp has phrased it, a "new sense of the political – of politics deconstructed not in the sense of giving up the space of the political, but in the sense of keeping it deconstructible. Open to revision, but in a radical sense" (Haverkamp 1995: 9). Emerson's revision of American thought consequently does not primarily want to effect a return to history, it aims to reinstate the right of a differential or singular present that opens up the field of historical representations for a refiguration, for new articulations.

Consequently, Emerson argues that "[t]he only sin is limitation" (*W*, II, 308) and that we need to accept that a characteristic exaggeration or going beyond is part of our existence. In the "Nature" essay of 1844, he conceives of nature as the place of this originary difference. Nature, as he argues, on the one hand is continuous and "always consistent," but on the other hand "she feigns to contravene her own love. She keeps her laws, and seems to transcend them" (*W*, III, 181). Taking his cue from astronomy, Emerson argues that there must always be an excessive energy that spurs things into motion:

10 For interesting comments on Emerson's notion of "experience" and the notion of a *Lebensphilosophie* in Heidegger and Nietzsche, see Dieter Thomä's "Eine Philosophie des Lebens jenseits des Biologismus und diesseits der 'Geschichte der Metaphysik': Bemerkungen zu Nietzsche und Heidegger mit Seitenblicken auf Emerson, Musil und Cavell" (2004).

> "The astronomers said, 'Give us matter and a little motion and we will construct the universe. It is not enough that we should have matter, we must also have a single impulse, one shove to launch the mass and generate the harmony of the centrifugal and centripetal forces.' [...] 'A very unreasonable postulate,' said the metaphysicians, 'and a plain begging of the question.' [...] Nature, meanwhile, had not waited for the discussion, but [...] bestowed the impulse, and the balls rolled. [...] That famous aboriginal push propagates itself through all the balls of the system, and through every atom of every ball; through all the races of creatures, and through the history and performances of every individual." (*W*, III, 184)

But the essay also suggests that such an exaggeration or excess is always also added to what we are 'proper,' and that it is precisely this impulse that is the spring of our existence: "Exaggeration is the course of things. Nature sends no creature, no man into the world without adding a small excess of his proper quality. Given the planet, it is still necessary to add the impulse" (*W*, III, 185). This "to add the impulse," I think, is an apt description of the differential, diverted course of history in Emerson. It comes as a "little violence of direction," as a "slight generosity, a drop too much" or as an "excess of direction" (*W*, III, 185). The course of history, well indeed of all things, betray this "profusion" as an incalculable excess that prevents things from 'properly' returning into themselves. This knowledge of our powerlessness *vis-à-vis* our fate may, as Emerson points out, "envelop us in dull, melancholy days" (*W*, III, 196) and it may be that "[t]he appearance strikes the eye everywhere of an aimless society, of aimless nations" (*W*, III, 192). On the other hand, we may realize that we at least "have some stake in every possibility" (*W*, III 196) and that, even if it reaches us unprepared, "[e]very moment instructs" (*W*, III, 196).

It is significant that Emerson here again associates nature's exaggeration with a certain mode of language in America: "Our music, our poetry, our language itself are not satisfactions, but suggestions" (*W*, III, 190). Language is the medium in which nature's disseminative effects are registered, where it becomes obvious that "[a]ll promise outruns the performance" and that "[w]e live in a system of approximations" (W, III, 190). More importantly, nature's excess here is itself a dissemination, it is neither continuous nor discontinuous, it is not within history and cannot be accounted for in a teleological narrative. It is "above time," only suggestive of things to come. Because Emerson himself suggests rather than predicts the future course of the American nation, John Dewey has connected Emerson's role as the first "Philosopher of Democracy" precisely with this spirit of suggestion when he argues that Emerson is the philosopher not of that particular democracy, 'America,' but of "any system which democracy may *henceforth* construct" (Dewey 1903: 412). Dewey insists that for Emerson, the age of democracy is "just now dawning" and presents itself as something whose implications are difficult to judge. Emerson, in Dewey's judgement, must therefore propose a "new type of literary art" that suggests a new "method of knowledge" responsive to the promise or suggestion of democracy. Emerson's enterprise then

comes as a path-breaking "more-than philosophy", as a type of discourse that goes beyond traditional metaphysics by engaging itself in a work that precisely is "art, not metaphysics" (Dewey 1903: 406).

Later commentators have characterized this move as a move away from a metaphysical idealism to a "cultural criticism". Cornel West has famously described it as Emerson's (and other American philosophers') "evasion of philosophy" (West 1989). And it is such a move that effectively defines Emerson's modernity. Dewey was the first to bring out this aspect of Emerson long buried under the transcendentalist image. Emerson himself is clearly aware of his eccentric or esoteric position as American philosopher. In a late lecture series at Harvard ("Natural History of the Intellect", delivered in 1871) he states: "I think philosophy is still rude and elementary. It will one day be taught by poets" (*W*, XII, 14). I take this not to suggest that philosophy should or will escape into the idealisms of poetry but, if we follow West, that it indicates the creation of a philosophical position that saw itself among other more "quotidian struggle" for meaning. As West explains when he examines Dewey's reaction to Emerson: "Dewey understands Emerson's evasion of modern philosophy [...] as a situating of philosophical reflection and poetic creation in the midst of quotidian human struggles for meaning, status, power, wealth, and selfhood" (West 1989: 73).

This more "quotidian struggle for meaning" for Emerson is also a possible definition of democracy. The American philosopher is here no longer the transcendental "man in the open air" (see Matthiessen 1968: 626-655), but man "related to nature and the human constitution" (*W*, I, 89). The philosopher in the American context thus comes already as a dissolution of the myth that Nietzsche will later describe as "reines, willenloses, schmerzloses, zeitloses Subjekt der Erkenntniß" (*KSA*, V, 365). As Stanley Cavell has argued, we are thus confronted with the question of "the philosopher in American life" that is, of how American philosophy is always "in quest of the ordinary," and of how this ordinary is the *locus as well as the theme* of American philosophy (see Cavell 1988: 3-26). For Emerson, as he phrases it in "Fate", philosophical debate turns "into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live?" (*W*, VI, 3).

Stanley Cavell has characterized both Wittgenstein and Emerson as "philosophers of culture". But culture, for the nineteenth-century context, is a highly problematic concept, as Cavell points out: with Emerson (just as with Wittgenstein), culture is a force or power rather than something given, material and obvious. Culture lies precisely in what Cavell terms the uncanniness of the ordinary, its characteristic quality is to be able to be manifest and problematic at the same time. I think that American studies have ignored Cavell's insight when they conceived of its aim as that of establishing a coherent narrative for American culture in the nineteenth century. It has therefore gone unnoticed how Emerson's call for "renovat[ing] life and our social state" (*W*, II, 75) always develops both out of and against the

predominant cultural tendencies of his time. Cultural or social renovation for Emerson does not merely rely on a cultural or individual vocation. And it does also not exclusively depend on the individual's self-culture or the nation's laborious improvement. It relies, essentially, on the emergent processes of force and power, that is, it relies on energies that can precisely not be made commensurable with the dogma of individual or national perfectionism.

This cultural renewal thus asks of the writer and philosopher to question his "conduct of life" and to adopt an attitude that is more than a plan. This attitude can be a devotion to the "here and now" (*W*, XI, 539), a "daily renovation of sensibility" (*W*, VIII, 282), or, as Richard Poirier has phrased it, a more general "attitude or disposition of preparedness to act" (Poirier 1987: 59). Emerson's concern for concrete questions of the conduct of life has not gone unnoticed but I think that it has never been considered as being problematic. And it is because of what may seem as a pretty straightforward interest in the conduct of life that Americanists have easily adopted Emerson into the tradition of pragmatism. As a consequence, Emerson's 'transcendentalism' looked like the blunder of a philosopher that had not yet found his bearing. Kenneth Burke for example, when connecting Emerson to the American tradition of pragmatism argues that "Emerson's brand of transcendentalism was but a short step ahead of out-and-out pragmatism" (Burke 1966: 9). But I think that Burke trusts too much in the self-reflection and self-grounding of Emerson's individual. Individual and national 'perfectionism' in Emerson precisely confront forces that are incommensurable with such a self-grounding. They clash with forces that go beyond or, more precisely, 'transcend' the construction of an individual or national narrative or genealogy. As a consequence, Emerson's transcendentalist extravagance is not only a stylistic idiosyncrasy, it marks a potential of his writing that prevents its easy integration into that tradition of American thought that Georges Santayana has later labelled "the Genteel Tradition" (see Santayana 1998: 37-64). It surfaces as Emerson's *modernity*, that is, as the irresolvable conflict or the antagonism between (individual and national) self-culture) and the incalculable forces it confronts.

Emerson's brand of transcendentalism is thus not so much a matter of what Matthiessen, Hopkins, Paul, Miller, Feidelson and others heralded as Emerson's transcendental "organicism or pantheism, as Puritan (or Oriental) mysticism" (Lopez 1994: 46), as Michael Lopez has phrased it. The going beyond of its transcendental aesthetic involves a more troublesome exposition or acknowledgement of a properly Nietzschean strain in Emerson's thought. The brilliant promise of individual and national self-culture in Emerson is always underwritten by "a recognition of the simple and terrible laws" (*W*, XII, 55), by a discovery of "the enormous elements of strength which [...] make our politics unimportant" (*W*, VI, 61), by an "aboriginal might," a "hairy Pelasgic strength," by a certain "plus or positive power" (*W*, VI, 71-73) and "beast-force" (*W*, VI, 252). These forces

always already form the dark underside of Emerson's characteristic optimism, and, when they surface, they should not be simply dismissed or defused as instances of Emerson's eccentricity or extravagance. These forces do not come as exceptions to Emerson's "moral mildness" or as the "exception that proved the Transcendentalist rule", rather, as Lopez argues, they form the other focus of Emerson's writing, challenging the "temperate monistic image" (Lopez 1994: 47) with an attention to that which goes beyond an optimistic human pragmatism.

The exposure of such a disturbing underside of transcendentalist optimism necessarily comes as an anomaly within the founding narrative of an American pragmatism because Emerson's interest in "power" necessarily undermines the image of the American "ideal man of self-reliant energy" (Matthiessen 1968: 367), actively coping with his environment. As Emerson warns in his journals:

> "We must beware of the nature of the spiritual world. It has this terrible power of self-change, self-accommodation to whatsoever we do, that Ovid's Metamorphoses take place continually. [...] We are not immoveably moored, as we are apt to think, to any bottom. And if we do wrong, and don't succeed, we think we can come back to where we were. That where is gone." (*J*, I, 271)

The danger of the spiritual world is thus also the danger of skepticism. But this skepticism in Emerson is only the figure of a more general de-basement of human action and intentionality. Even in our willingness to act, even in our most self-reliant gestures, Emerson suggests, we cannot instrumentalise our conditions because they have a life of their own, because they are themselves the expression of a power that is beyond our control. Emerson's call for "self-reliance" or "self-command" (*W*, I, 43), for "heroic acts" (*W*, I, 77), or for the "dominion" (*W*, I, 40) or "the kingdom of "man over nature" (*W*, I, 77), his assertion of "new activity" (*W*, I, 70) and "new creation" (*W*, I, 23) knows perfectly well about this underside of a transcendental optimism. More importantly, this attitude is never innocent, it necessarily comes as a reaction to the knowledge of the "unmooredness" or "bottomlessness" of our ways of coping with the world.

As long as Emerson's writing served as the exclusive origin of a specifically American literature and philosophy, this fascination for the ambivalence of power had to go unnoticed. It was only when it became apparent that there is an important connection that goes beyond the connection of Emerson and pragmatism's instrumentalism by pointing out continuities between Emerson and Nietzsche – in Eduard Baumgarten's elaboration of a sequence among Emerson, James, Dewey and Nietzsche as founders of a "Philosophie der Macht" (Baumgarten 1938), in Matthiessen's comparison of Emerson's ideal man of self-reliance and "the hard-willed *Übermensch*" (Matthiessen 1968: 368), in Perry Miller's remarks on the Napoleonic undercurrent in Emerson's adoration of genius (Miller 1967: 171), or in Daniel Aaron's discussion of Emerson as "the seer of laisser-faire capitalism and the rampant individual" (Aaron 1951: 8) – that an

irreconcilable conflict or ambivalence between a trademark optimism and an equally characteristic attitude of indecision or irresolution started to surface.[11] A conflict that, in the last instance, is also the conflict at the heart of an American ideology between the brilliant promise of manifest destiny and its (technological) catastrophe. Again then, to a certain degree, one could argue that Emerson's ambivalence can be explained with regards to his own contemporary moment (see Chapter One): he witnesses an age in which 'America' is fundamentally changed, an age that saw both the promise and the danger of America's future. And in Emerson, this characteristic ambivalence or, rather, undecidability also extends to man himself. Just as the contemporary historical moment comprises conflicting and incalculable emerging forces and is not merely a fact of history, so is man himself an "arsenal of forces" (*W*, X, 69). This is why "[t]here is not yet any inventory of a man's faculties, any more than a bible of his opinions" (*W*, VI, 53) and why Emerson sees himself "as a geometer of [man's] forces" (*J*, IX, 464).

It is not difficult to see that Emerson's ambivalent position on the intentionality of human action and thought would hardly be compatible with the philosophy of action in the tradition of American pragmatism that it was said to establish. For the philosophers of American pragmatism, daily experience and everyday actions became their predominant field of application. But pragmatism often presupposes a today as the stable ground upon which the pragmatist makes his actional choices. William James – to provide a case in point –, on the flyleafs added to his edition of Emerson's writing preserved in the collection of James' philosophical library at Harvard, carefully annotates Emerson's essays and, under the heading "to-day", cross-references many passages in which he finds his own interest in the moment of a today as the stage for action reflected (see Carpenter 1939). But while the pragmatists wanted to locate the today as the (unproblematic, transparent, foundational) point of departure for further action, Emerson sees "the hour that now is" or the "earnest experience of the common day" (*W*, II, 290) in a much more ambivalent light, as a passage from his "Lecture on the Times" makes obvious:

11 Eduard Baumgarten, a student of Heidegger's, is in fact the first to investigate the connection between Emerson and Nietzsche. Baumgarten, who from 1936 to 1938 publishes a two-volume account on *Die geistigen Grundlagen des amerikanischen Gemeinwesens*, argues that Emerson's connection with Nietzsche is "das einzige gross-greifbare Beispiel einer echten Begegnung zwischen Deutschland und Amerika" (Baumgarten 1936: II, 396). When asked for his opinion, Heidegger later attempted to prevent Baumgarten's employment at the University of Göttingen on the grounds that he, Baumgarten, had been "erheblich amerikanisiert … in Haltung und Denkweise" (*GA* 16, 774-75) during his stay in America. How strongly Heidegger was influenced by his own anti-Americanism in his denunciation of Baumgarten remains yet to be investigated. See also Hermann Hummel, who remarks in 1946 that Emerson „must be regarded as the teacher and master rather than as a 'précurseur' of Nietzsche" (Hummel 1946: 84). Scholarship on the important connection between Emerson and Nietzsche has not been frequent, but interest in this trans-atlantic exchange has been steadily increasing since Stanley Cavell's description of an Emerson "after Nietzsche and Heidegger". For a good overview, see for example "The Anti-Emerson Tradition" in Michael Lopez' *Emerson and Power* (1994: 19-52). For a more comprehensive study, see George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (1992). Various more specialized approaches to the connection between Emerson and Nietzsche are presented in the special issue on "Emerson and Nietzsche" of *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 43/1, 1997.

> "To-day is a king in disguise. To-day always looks mean to the thoughtless, in the face of an uniform experience that all good and great and happy actions are made up precisely of these blank to-days. Let us not be so deceived. Let us unmask the king as he passes. Let us not inhabit times of wonderful and various promise without divining their tendency. Let us not see the foundations of nations, and of a new and better order of things laid, with roving eyes, and an attention preoccupied with trifles." (*W*, I, 267-268)

Emerson is happy to merely "divine" the implications of the present moment of culture because he knows that its tendencies cannot be inventarized. There is then in Emerson a profound hesitation as to whether the moment of the "to-day," its tendencies and promises, can be realized or can be achieved, let alone be instrumentalzed. Again, we are concerned here with a present that consists of contradictory tendencies, temporalities, and promises. Emerson's present is "factitious" in Heidegger's sense: it stands both for our everyday experiences as well as for everything that is unrecognized or unthematised. It thus includes a moment in which the ordinary becomes *uncanny* (Cavell's term), a moment in which the present exposes its own *ruination* (Heidegger's term). As Emerson points out in *Nature*: "All promise outruns the performance. We live in a system of approximations. Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere" (*W*, III, 190). As we have seen, this self-difference of the present moment for Emerson is a symptom or, rather, sign of America's modernity. It forms America's "groundless ground" which "is the precise symbol of our whole position in the universe, our whole social and moral status" (*LL*, II, 280). It is precisely this insistence on the self-difference of the present that Emerson points to European philosophers in the tradition of a critique of metaphysics, especially Nietzsche and Heidegger.

The risk of "carrying on the world"

It is Emerson's life-long ambition to find a mode of writing or a rhetoric that would be able to express the present's flux of forces. In a passage from his journal, he suggests that he has only begun to answer this task: "Our American letters are, we confess, in the optative mood" (*J,* V, 409). Two years later, the passage is recirculated into "The Transcendentalist": "Our American literature and spiritual history are, we confess, in the optative mood" (*W*, I, 342). Literature thus becomes a medium in which America's indecision, its location between the ages can be thematised. Again then, it is not the more systematized discourse of philosophy, but a notion of poetic or literary writing that is essential to Emerson's project. And indeed, as Jacques Derrida has argued, the advent of the form that we call literature is related to the advent of the political form that we call democracy. Derrida speaks of literature as

> "[a] historical institution with its conventions, rules, etc., but also this institution of fiction which gives *in principle* the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to Institute [sic], to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution [...] The institution of literature in the West, in its relatively modern form, is linked to an authorization to say everything and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy. Not that it depends on a democracy in place, but it seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy." (Derrida 1992 37)

As a discourse that is open to the incalculable effects of figurality, literature always already goes beyond philosophy that tries to control these effects. Because of its potential for polysemy and plurisignation, its potential for rhetorical *difference*, it comes into being as a privileged medium to express the singular *tropes* and *turns* that in democracy are a condition of the possibility of freedom. And indeed, nineteenth-century American writers are looking for a form of writing that can embody the radical politics of democracy. Emerson himself is interested in what he calls the poetics of "primal warblings" (*W*, III, 8) as "pre-cantations," as he expresses it with a musical term in "The Poet," that "pre-exist, or super-exist" (*W*, III, 25) any integration into a notion of "soul" (*W*, III, 21) or a "song of the nation" (*W*, III, 8). Whitman – using similar musical terminology – conceives of his "chant" as a "lawless music" (Whitman 1980: 663). And even Tocqueville seems to realize – tough anxiously – democracy's special proclivity for what he describes as "works conceived on such a vast scale and portraits so extravagant in their proportions" (*DiA*, 561). It is important to maintain that Emerson – with his poetics of "infinitely repellent particles" (*CEC*, 185) – and Whitman – with his paratactical catalogues and his free-verse scansion – do not merely conceive of their poetic projects as experiments in stylistic innovation. They strongly believe that their "language experiment" – this is Whitman's term in his unpublished notebooks (see Kummings 2006: 361) – does not merely describe or talk about the democratic experience. They think that their poetry opens a space for a more "radical correspondence" (*W*, I, 29) in which poetry itself transforms American democracy into a construct that is poetic, in other words: open to change, open to future or supplementary meaning.

Consequently, they conceive of the function of writing as one of giving space for an event of meaning before any notion of a discourse of "representativity." Again, I think that Jacques Derrida's comments on the connection between the forms of literature and of democracy are helpful in order to understand the kind of "radical correspondence" that Emerson envisions:

> "[The] experience of writing is 'subject' to an imperative: to give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which, in changing

> language, change more than language. […] In order for this singular performativity to be effective, for something new to be produced, historical competence is not indispensable in a certain form (that of a certain academic kind of knowledge, for example, on the subject of literary history), but it increases the chances." (Derrida 1992: 55)

Literature is thus the space in which a singular performativity expresses itself. But it expresses itself precisely not as another representative historical discourse, but as poetry, that is, as a series of rhetorical or figural turns. It is precisely literature's poetic licence, its "*right to say everything,*" as Derrida argues, that "ties its destiny to a certain non-censure, to the space of democratic freedom. No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy. […] [I]n no case can one dissociate on from the other" (Derrida 1992: 23).

What then, one may ask, is the relationship between democracy and literature? That of metonymy, metaphor, mutual exchange or analogy? Democracy is literature? Democracy is literature is America? Yes, but only in the provisional sense that this "is" has *any* kind of meaning. In other words: it is exactly in the singular moments in which literature insists on its "right to say everything" – which includes the right to not say anything at all or say something that does not make much sense at all – that it is democratic, and it is exactly in these moments in which democracy changes into something radically different, that it becomes a fiction, invention and, therefore, the expression of a (political, poetic, literary) freedom. America's expression and emergence as a democracy consequently implies a characteristically Derridean turn: it comes as a paradoxical or, rather, chiastic founding in which its literary description is, simultaneously, its emergence or advent as a democracy. And indeed, that this performativity produces that which it describes is true both for the discourses of literature as well as that of democracy. Literature is thus, as Derrida argues, not an "institution among others or like other":

> "[I]t is an institution which consists in transgressing and transforming, thus in producing its constitutional law; or, to put it better, in producing discursive forms, "works" and "events" in which the very possibility of a fundamental constitution is at least "fictionally" contested, threatened, deconstructed, presented in its very precariousness. Hence, while literature shares a certain power and a certain destiny with "jurisdiction," […] at a certain point it can only exceed them, interrogate them, "fictionalize" them: with nothing, or almost nothing, in view, of course, and by producing events whose "reality" or duration is never assured, but which by that very fact are more thought-provoking, if that still means something." (Derrida 1992: 72)

As we have seen, the "poetic" in Emerson is precisely the place of what Derrida here calls transgression or transformation. It is conceived of as an opening – or "abandonment," as Emerson would term it – to the rhetoricity or figurality of language that produces an effect of radical correspondence or poetic *Vollzug* that cannot itself be reduced to a theme or be construed from its context. The poetic, as a "singular concatenations of words" (Culler 1995: 46), to use Jonathan Culler's

definition of the lyric, opens up to a new sense, and this sense may also be political.

As we have seen earlier, the attitude of opening up to such a new sense, of receiving or acknowledging the possibility of a new sense in Emerson comes as a demand or a responsibility in the "to-day." It is only when the writer attends to the unorganized materialities of the present moment of culture – to that which "dwells in the hour that now is" (*W*, II, 290) – that he can hope to be changed, to be surprised "out of his propriety," as Emerson phrases it in "Circles":

> "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment." (*W*, II, 321)

In "Self-Reliance" he argues that the "moment of transition from a past to a new state" is always imminent, "becoming" (*W*, II, 69). And it is only an abandonment to the undecided potential of the today and not an act of deliberation that will effect the advent of the new state (of the "perfected" individual, of American democracy). The American writer must thus develop an attitude – a characteristically Emersonian "mood", as Stanley Cavell would say (Cavell 2003: 20) – that is again similar to what Derrida describes as "friendship":

> "Friendship is never a present given, it belongs to the experience of expectation, promise, or engagement. Its discourse is that of prayer, it inaugurates, but reports (*constate*) nothing, is not satisfied with what is, it moves out to this place where a responsibility opens up a future." (Derrida 1997: 236)

If democracy is an emergent form, then the call for such an attitude is a constant one and comes as a general call for cultural reorientation. As Derrida points out:

> "For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept." (Derrida 1997: 306)

Emerson's question of "Where do we find us today?" does therefore not ask for an authoritative description of American culture in the present moment. Rather, it asks us to acknowledge a fundamental gap or, as Emerson terms it, a "verge" between what we are and a potential or promise that is yet unfulfilled. It has to be understood as presenting or exposing, critically, two fictions: that of the "we" and that of the "today". Both are questioned as to a potential in them that is not yet actualized. The "today" is not the (democratic) end of history, and the "we" is not yet the fulfilled promise of a community that is 'American'. The question thus locates 'America' in the kind of "disjointed time" that Derrida seeks to define as the place of an ethos of democracy in *Specters of Marx* (Derrida 1994: 3).

Emerson's writing has doubtlessly produced some of the genetic myths of American culture and it continues to produce them today. But, I want to insist, because of its openness to a poetic sense it necessarily also undergoes an "excess of direction" (*W*, III, 185) and thus undermines the very myths that it perpetuates. Consequently, Emerson issues a warning:

> "Whilst thus the energy for originating and executing work deforms itself by excess, and so our axe chops off our own fingers [...] . All the elements whose aid man calls in will sometimes become his masters, especially those of most subtle force." (*W*, VI, 68)

Emerson knows that this kind of poetic "carrying on [of] the world" (*W*, VI, 71) is not without its risk: it implies a very real chance that in our confrontation with the unachieved forces of "what we are today" we encounter an "excess" that is beyond our control and that has the power to radically change us. Emerson thus locates an "explosive complexion" (*W*, VI, 68) at the heart of his theory of a poetic understanding of America. It implies that we need to give up our claims for a 'representative' discourse about America and instead need to favour a poetic language that in its shifting moments leads to the unfolding or discovery of new sense that we may not be able calculate in the last instance. But as we have seen before, it is precisely in the incalculability or unforeseeability of its poetic sense that Emerson also locates America's (democratic) promise. As a result, democracy and, for that matter, 'America' are no longer *instituted* or *founded*, rather, they are synonymous with a constant cultural production, tantamount to a process of "unending" cultural perfectionism that never quite reaches its end (Cavell 1990: 138).

Consequently, the poetry of America's democracy is always yet to come. And indeed, Maurice Blanchot has suggested in *The Book to Come*, the presence of poetry is necessarily always "to come":

> "The presence of poetry is still to come: it comes from beyond the future and does not stop coming when it is here. A temporal dimension different from the one of which the time of the world has made us masters is at play, in language when language lays bare, by the rhythmic scansion of being the space of its unfolding." (Blanchot 2003: 239)

Emerson's theory of the advent of the American age thus presents a decisive break from contemporary (Hegelian) philosophy of history that sees the conflict of history resolved in a series of harmonized stages – and where democracy would be one clearly identifiable stage in the progress of a nation. For Emerson, the advent of the American age is first and foremost – and before the specification of America's place in history – the emergence of new forms of cultural production and the advent of a *poetic* theory of democratic politics in which the advent of democracy is not the result of some authoritative founding act (by the founding fathers, by 'representative' Americans, by the "American scholar," etc.) but the persistent attention to a poetic process by way of which Americans continually open up to a new sense (of themselves, of America, etc.). It would be wrong to consider this as

a kind of nihilism or to see it as a negation of change. As Blanchot points out, poetry can be a "restrained action" that effectively changes the world:

> "Because there is poetry not only is something changed in the universe, but there is an essential change of the universe, whose meaning the realization of the Book only discovers or builds. Poetry always inaugurates something else. In relation to the real, one can call it unreal ("this country did not exist"); in relation to the time of our world, "the interregnum" or "the eternal"; in relation to the action that modifies nature, "restrained action." (Blanchot and Mandell 2003: 238)

Emerson's conceptualization of the poetic emergence of America obviously takes some of its cultural suggestiveness from the fact that the notion of a "language of creation" has always been a central part of Puritan ideology. But whereas Puritans believed the ideology to be self-evident – and, consequently, believed that the realization of the American garden of Eden was *quasi* automatic – Emerson conceives of a moment of mediation as central to the advent of America's age. This advent presupposes an "interregnum" (Blanchot's term), a "slight discontinuity" or "indescribably small interval" (*W*, XII, 44), as Emerson phrases it. The moment of America's *Entdeckung* as a democracy is thus not the moment of some "perfect sight" (Porte 1979: 79), as Joel Porte has argued, rather, it is a moment brought about by the mediation of language, a mediation in which language itself gains a poetic presence. Emerson knows that "we do not see directly; but mediately" (*W*, III: 75) and he constantly reminds us of what Cadava has called, with regards to Emerson's *Nature*, an "irremediable belatedness" (Cadava 1997: 127): "If Emerson's *Nature* [...] reveals anything, it is perhaps the vision of the end of vision, the revelation that everything begins in a moment of mediation" (Cadava 1997: 128). Emerson's oeuvre is thus not so much what Oliver Wendell Holmes has called "the Book of Revelation of our Saint Radulphus" (Holmes 1885: 103), but rather a testament to those intermediary moments of transition, conversion, or emergence that he deems so important. Instead of promising "revelation" and rather like that famous unreachable green light across the bay in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Emerson thinks of America's promise as one that is necessarily postponed. And, as Lawrence Buell has correctly pointed out, this is also why we need to see Emerson less as the enthusiastic orphic chanter but rather as a writer who realizes a potential for "nonresolution in [his] prose" (Buell 1984: 136).

But again, the acknowledgment of a moment of mediation for Emerson does not necessarily mean that we have to give up our hope for change. In the intermediary moment of language something happens, something "becomes," as Emerson would say, but this something is not at once or immediately reducible to the process of history. History itself, Emerson would argue, is precisely this process of mediation. As Cadava has pointed out, history in Emerson is the possibility of recognizing the world as mediated, as the "result of man's own labor within time" (Cadava 1997: 128). And thus this mediation necessarily comes as a rupture, as Emerson insists in "Circles":

> "Life is a series of surprises. We do not guess to-day the mood, the pleasure, the power of to-morrow, when we are building up our being. Of lower states, of acts of routine and sense, we can tell somewhat; but the masterpieces of God, the total growths and universal movements of the soul, he hideth; they are incalculable. [...] The new position of the advancing man has all the powers of the old, yet has them all new. It carries in its bosom all the energies of the past, yet is itself an exhalation of the morning. I cast away in this new moment all my once hoarded knowledge, as vacant and vain. Now for the first time seem I to know any thing rightly. The simplest words, – we do not know what they mean except when we love and aspire." (*W*, II, 320)

Even history's seemingly all-powerful process of transumption, I take Emerson to say, confronts the more powerful moment of a characteristic force ("surprise," "growths," "movements," "energies," "exhalation") that marks the excess of its system. This is why, even if we consciously or strategically "build up our being," inescapably, "there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable" (*W*, II, 306), as he suggests elsewhere in the essay. And characteristically, Emerson's metaphysical theories (of correspondence, of compensation, of analogy, of genius, etc.) also include such an excessive moment in which the system is taken beyond its proper limits. Clearly, we can discern here a strong echo of Hegelian philosophy where the ultimate aim is the restoration of harmony. Even though how Hegel rates philosophy's chances at reaching this goal has become a contented issue today, Emerson is aware of the achievements of a dialectic vision of history: "By going one step farther back in thought, discordant opinions are reconciled, by being seen to be two extremes of one principle" (*W*, II, 308). Emerson's conclusion in the same essay, however, remarkably challenges Hegelian orthodoxy by suggesting that there can be no final harmony or synthesis, because "we can never go so far back as to preclude a still higher vision" (*W*, II, 308). But to believe in the possibility of that "higher vision" again signals both a promise as well as a profound risk: "Then all things are at risk. It is as when a conflagration has broken out in a great city, and no man knows what is safe, or where it will end. [...] The very hopes of man, [...] are all at the mercy of a new generalization" (*W*, II, 380-309).

We thus always find in Emerson the double movement of trying to achieve the next step in history while knowing that the transition to the next stage – if it is a real transition – exposes us and what we are to a profound risk. Emerson's writing therefore oscillates between the insistence on a future harmony, the promise of a "central Unity" (*W*, I, 44) – that must necessarily become a "degradation" (*W*, I, 45) at the precise moment when we think we have achieved it – and a "division" (*W*, II, 269) or "some foreign force, some diversion or alterative" (*W*, VI, 147). Our attempts at planning our lifes and structuring our experiences are thus met with what Emerson calls "[t]hat great principle of Undulation in nature" (*W*, I, 98), or, more generally, the "law of compensation" (*W*, II, 96) that "balances every gift and every defect" (*W*, I, 97). The formulation of a final identity, in its mobilization and appropriation of an incalculable principle must thus necessarily end in atonement.

Emerson's constant insistence on a residuum – "unknown, unanalyzable" – pertaining both to the origin as well as the result of progress, also lets me doubt Michael Lopez's assertion of a thoroughly "de-transcentalized" Emerson. Even if a final transcendence (of division, of time, etc.) is precluded in Emerson's writing, he still wants to conceive of moments in his writing that, in their singular impact, "transcend" historical time. But because these moments are themselves "incalculable," Emerson must recognize that they can only be "harbingers or forerunners" of that promised land of a "purely spiritual life" (*W*, I, 338), as he states in "The Transcendentalist". The prospect of Idealism is thus obscured by the fact that "the most aspiring genius" is "neutralized" (*W*, I, 345), that our "extravagant demands" are answered by a "strange disappointment" (*W*, I, 344). Emerson's writing underscores this by an almost incessant movement of self-parody, as Evan Carton has argued: "Emerson's language incorporates affirmation and denial, simultaneously undercuts (but does not quite undermine) the argument it forges, shadows its own creative claims with critical counterclaims, places irreconcilable but inextricable self-images side by side" (Carton 1985: 25-26).

Other than the exponents of an American politics of 'improvement' (see Chapter One), Emerson's politics must thus risk the very idea and ideal of America. And his insistence on the name 'America' is therefore not to be taken as a foreseeable ideal, but rather as a receding horizon of perfectibility. It is the name that undergoes a persistent auto-deconstruction, is continually exposed to its own excess, but is nevertheless invoked as a promise or hope that answers to the urgency of a changing America *here and now*. American culture itself, for Emerson, must thus remain prospective, as he points out in "Circles": "Our culture is the predominance of an idea which draws after it this train of cities and institutions. Let us rise into another idea; they will disappear" (*W*, II, 302). America, the nation and the concept, can thus never be achieved, because it is itself a name for a process of transition, for a specific attitude towards change:

> "This old age ought not to creep on a human mind. In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit. [...] People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." (*W*, II, 319-320).

Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, was the first to be puzzled by this specifically American or democratic openness to future change:

> "Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it to the full. No sooner does full equality seem within the people's reach than it flies from their grasp, and its flight, as Pascal said, is eternal. The people passionately seek a good that is all the more precious because it is close enough to be familiar yet far enough away that it cannot be savoured. The chance of success spurs them on; the uncertainty of success vexes them. (*DiA*, 226)

Tocqueville considers the prospective nature of democracy's promise a problem, a "passion" that prevents the instalment of a more programmatic democratic politics.

The deferral of democracy's promise whenever it seems to arrive at itself, the postponement of the advent of an 'authentic' ideal of democracy, for Tocqueville, signals the necessary corruption of the democratic project in America. For Emerson, on the other hand, it signals America's specific promise because he believes that it is precisely the fact that we cannot quite calculate our contemporary moment, that we cannot quite give a comprehensive account of 'what we are' and 'where we find ourselves,' that upholds the promise for future change.

It is in the essay "Experience" that Emerson most forcefully presents an account of how democracy's elusiveness is the source of a responsibility that is specifically American. In the opening pages, Emerson mourns that nature never lets us directly experience its objects: "Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents" (*W*, III, 50). Emerson locates an all-pervading disjunction or division in the world that prevents all direct communication between our experiences and their apprehension in thought. Mourning the death of his recently deceased son, Emerson shocks the reader by comparing his child's death to a piece of real estate – "In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, – no more. I cannot get it nearer to me" (*W*, III, 48) –, underwriting a radical rupture between the event of a world and how we perceive and experience it. But Emerson turns his own experience of grief into a more programmatic and even political argument in "Experience" when he argues that such a division is both the agon as well as the driving force of a specifically American (political) desire. Emerson, too, realizes that democracy can never quite arrive at itself when he admits that he takes "this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition" (*W*, III, 49). But it is precisely such an elusiveness of the presence of democracy that is also the inauguration of an *ethos*, of a responsibility specific to America. As he argues, again in "Experience":

> "Since our office is with moments, let us husband them. Five minutes of to-day are worth as much to me as five minutes in the next millennium. Let us be poised, and wise, and our own, to-day. Let us treat the men and women well; treat them as if they were real; perhaps they are." (*W*, III, 60)

The responsibility towards the other that Emerson calls for, comes unconditionally, and it pertains to the *here and now*, to our own contemporary moment. Because this moment itself continually changes and is continually changing us, we cannot live up to this responsibility once and for all, we cannot "calculate" it, as Emerson says:

> "How easily, if fate would suffer it, we might keep forever these beautiful limits, and adjust ourselves, once for all, to the perfect calculation of the kingdom of known cause and effect. In the street and in the newspapers, life appears so plain a business that

> manly resolution and adherence to the multiplication-table through all weathers will insure success. But ah! presently comes a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering, – which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years!" (*W*, III, 67)

The conflicting, irreducible temporalities and materialities of the present moment of culture will thus always thwart our attempts at predicting its future course. And even if our everyday lives are very much ordinary, unmarked, or "plain," as Emerson terms it, they have a strange way of eluding us precisely in the moment in which we try to "clutch" them or establish a firm grip on them. For Cavell, this characteristic "uncanniness" of the ordinary can be a source of a profound skepticism in American culture (Cavell 1988). However, for Cavell as well as for Emerson, there is a route of escape from this danger of skepticism that comes as a willingness to accept, as an "acknowledgment," as Cavell terms it, that we cannot control or calculate our lifes in the last instance:

> "Power keeps quite another road than the turnpikes of choice and will; namely the subterranean and invisible tunnels and channels of life. It is ridiculous that we are diplomatists, and doctors, and considerate people; there are no dupes like these. Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping if it were not." (*W*, III, 67)

Every contemporary moment may thus come as an unforeseeable challenge to what we think is our established identity. "Nature hates calculators" (*W*, III, 68), Emerson says and argues that all progress is the consequence not of our active planning, not of our chosen acts, but a result of a casualty or irreducibility of our "casual" experience: "[T]he mind goes antagonizing on, and never prospers but by fits. We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual" (*W*, III, 68). This is why Emerson, quoting Luke 17:20, insists that the new in 'America' is a "'kingdom that cometh without observation'" (*W*, III, 68). As a consequence, the "results of life" are necessarily "uncalculated and uncalculable" (*W*, III, 69) and Emerson agrees that we may be "struck with this irreducibleness of the elements of human life to calculation" (*W*, III, 69). But it is also precisely this irreducibility of the elements that form our present moment of culture that ensure change, that opens up our contemporary moment to a general and potentially radical "newness" (*W*, III, 68). Hence, the irreducibility of "that which is coexistent" (*W*, III, 70), that is the contemporary moment that "knows not its tendency" (*W*, III, 70). But it is precisely because its event is unforeseeable that it possesses a potential for change: "The miracle of life which will not be expounded but will remain a miracle, introduces a new element" (*W*, III, 70). Life, as a "flux of moods" (*W*, III, 72), is thus never quite present with itself, it always reminds us of the possibility of something else, of a potential "passage into new worlds" (*W*, III, 85). Thus, "[o]ur life seems not present so much as prospective" (*W*, III, 73). Emerson thus locates a certain compensation for an experience of division in moments of "temperament" or "surprise" (*W*, III, 82). As he claims enthusiastically: "Onward and onward! In

liberated moments we know that a new picture of life and duty is already possible" (*W*, III, 75).

Emerson's democratic ethics consequently implies a responsibility for America's *here and now*. But it does so not because it believes that it finds 'America' as a state more perfected than others. It is because the present – as an incalculable "flux" or emerging force – holds a potential for change that is located as the space of democracy. Emerson's urgent call that we attend to the present moment thus also opens this very moment to the advent of something else. And this is precisely the complex temporal structure that Jacques Derrida has identified as characteristic of democracy: "The to-come of democracy is also, although without presence, the hic et nunc of urgency, of the injunction as absolute urgency" (Derrida 2005: 73). In Emerson's words: "We must set up the strong present tense against all the rumors of wrath, past or to come" (*W*, III, 63). The present moment of American culture – as an intermediary or vanishing state – thus functions as the space of a communal reconciliation or "conversation" (*W*, III, 55) as Emerson terms it. This communal space between is a "narrow belt" (*W*, III, 62) and consists only of "astronomical interspaces betwixt atom and atom" (*W*, III, 63-64). But even as an "indescribably small interval" (*W*, XII, 44), as Emerson calls this space of an *Inzwischen* in "Powers and Laws of Thought," it can bring about a "conversation" and thus potentially opens us up to a qualitatively different future: "All good conversation, manners and action come from a spontaneity which forgets usages and makes the moment great" (*W*, III, 68). The vanishing mediator of the present moment, that "middle region of our being" (W, III, 62), functions thus as a reconciliatory moment "between these extremes" of the past and the future, it is the "equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry" (*W*, III, 62), that is, the place of all the forces that, if we are willing to abandon ourselves to them, may change us and may make a radically different future possible.

This would also explain why for Emerson the "immensity of to-day" or the "passing hour" is the very "age of ages" (*W*, X, 194). As a necessary condition for the possibility of change, it is that which makes history possible. If Emerson's "to-day," as a moment "in the present, above time" (*W*, I, 67) comes as a departure from history, as its excess, then it also brings us back to history by making historicity itself possible. In other words, it is precisely in making change possible, precisely in its opening up to a different future that the irreducible moment of the "to-day" is constitutive of any historicity. With the "to-day" being a "present in disguise" or in "flight" (*W*, IV, 273), the precise nature of the historical course of the American democracy can, however, not be predicted, but as a receding horizon of perfectibility it can nevertheless be culturally effective. As Derrida points out with regards to the promise of democracy: "Whether the promise promises this or that, whether it be fulfilled or not, or whether it be unfulfillable,

there is necessarily some promise and therefore some historicity as future-to-come" (Derrida 1994: 73).

Towards the end of the essay "Experience," Emerson again asserts the present's potential for effecting a radical conversion or *epohkè*. In fact, the making of the democratic individual in Emerson is intimately linked to a certain willingness to abandon oneself to this radical potential of the present moment. As Emerson points out: "I am ready to die out of nature and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America" (*W*, III, 72). Democracy's future promise – "this new yet unapproachable America" – has to be approached unconditionally, it is something given to us not by ourselves, not as a result of our rational choices, but "out of nature," that is, as the result of a confrontation with the conflicting materialities of our contemporary moment. Given that we accept that our condition is "unhandsome" and that we cannot "clutch" anything once and for all, there is thus nevertheless the contingency for a certain enthusiasm or optimism that comes in the form of our identification with the promise of democracy: "And what a future it opens!," Emerson exclaims and finishes with what we have to read as a utopian promise rather than as a programmatic imperative:

> "[I]n the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations which in his passage into new worlds he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!—it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power." (*W*, III, 85-86)

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- "Schulische Schreibprojekte mit Wikis", Veranstaltung im Rahmen der ICT-Weiterbildungen am Realgymnasium Rämibühl, Januar 2011
- "Narratologie für die Schule?", Vortrag im Rahmen einer Weiterbildungsveranstaltung des "Forums Alte Sprachen Zürich", März 2010
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- "Die 'allgemeine Wohlfahrt' als 'Brechmittel': Nietzsche und Amerika", Forschungskolloquium am Englischen Seminar, Universität Zürich, FS08.
- "Vom *common sense* zur 'lauten, schrillen Stimme der Republik': Poetisches und politisches Denken bei Emerson, Melville und Whitman", Forschungskolloquium am Englischen Seminar, Universität Zürich, FS08.
- "'Es begann mit dem Wunsch, mit den Toten zu sprechen': Stephen Greenblatts Unterhaltung mit den Toten," Konferenz "Totenkulte", Graduiertenkolleg "Figur(en) des Dritten", Universität Konstanz, Deutschland, Januar 2005
- "Eine Forensik des Lesens", Vorlesungsreihe *On Narrative*, Universität Zürich, Dezember 2004
- "Was ist das, eine Poetik des Zeitgenössischen?", German Department, University of Chicago, USA, Februar 2004.
- "Habits of Appropriation: Shakespeare as a Reader", Vorlesungsreihe *Shakespearean Refigurations*, Universität Zürich, Mai 2004
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- "Probleme literarischer Zeitgenossenschaft", Forschungskolloquium des Graduiertenkollegs "Figuren des Dritten", Universität Konstanz, November 2003.
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Publikationen

- Tobias Weber, Patrick Eiden, Nacim Ghanbari, Martin Zillinger, *Totenkulte* (Campus: Frankfurt am Main, 2006).
- Tobias Weber, Ariane Lüthi, Christian Villiger, Reto Zöllner, *Sprache als Material / Matière du langage / The Materiality of Language*, *Variations*, Nr. 17 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).
- Tobias Weber, "'That indescribably small interval': Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Problem of the American Epoch", *Variations,* Nr. 15 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), S. 49-62.
- Tobias Weber, "Rückkehr / Retour / Return – Einleitung", *Variations*, Nr. 14 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), S. 9-12.
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- Tobias Weber, Sylvie Jeanneret, Iman Laversuch, Hannes Schneider, *Politik und Fiktion / Politique et Fiction / Politics and Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang Verlag, 2005 [= *Variations*, Nr. 13, 2005]).
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